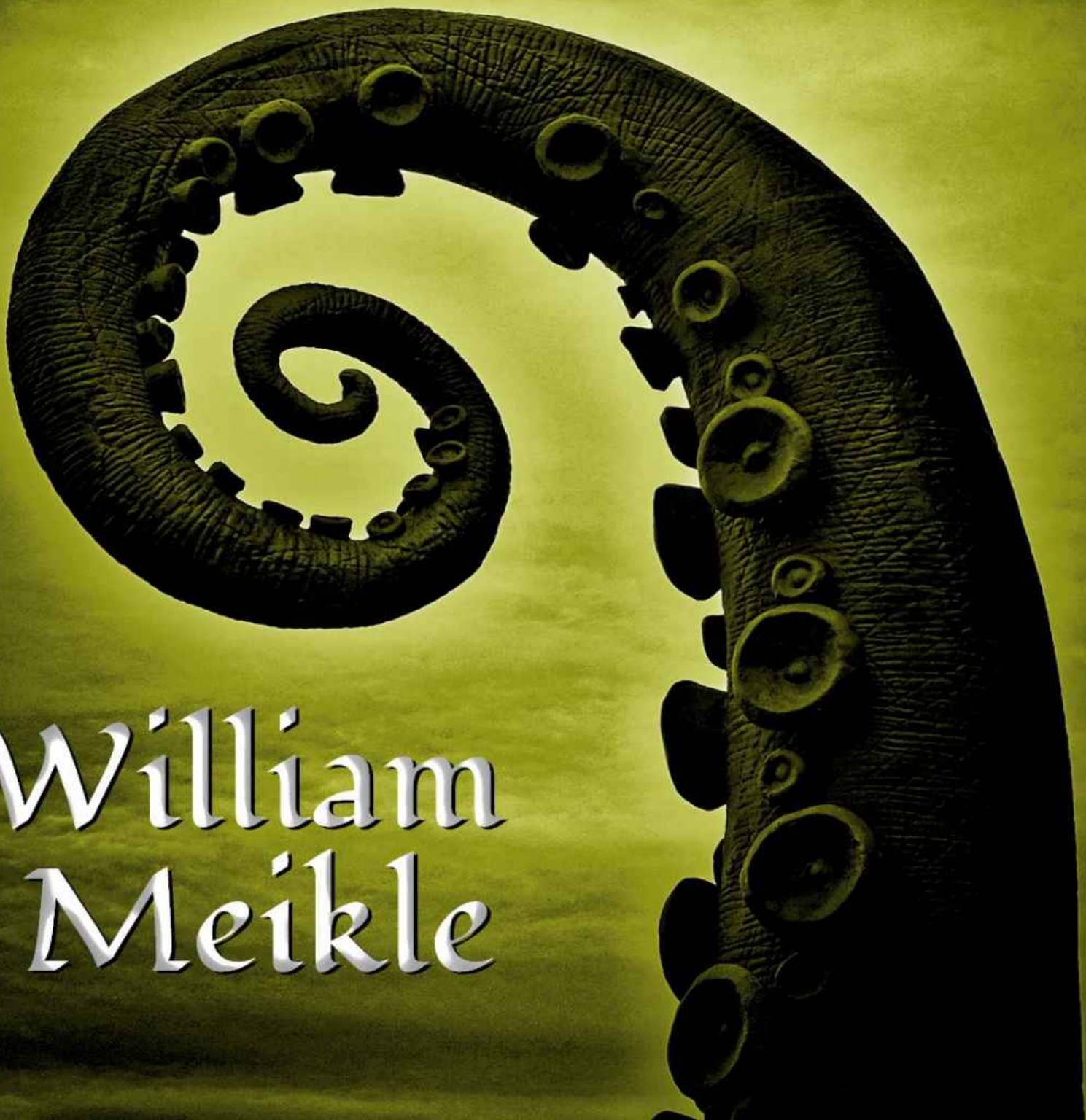
HOME FROM THE SEA



William Meikle

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William Meikle
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SymbiOS

I tongued the switch in the palate implant and tasted pus at the back of my throat. The side eye-bar came up opaque rather than translucent. It was already unreadable while walking around, and it now it had started to fade in and out of focus.

It's not going last much longer.

And when it went, that would be it for me, my last link to the glittering prizes severed. I can't say I was too surprised. I had already fallen most of the way down; one final step wasn't going to change matters any.

I had picked my way through the discarded garbage on the tunnel floor for half an hour to get here. I hadn't been in the station since the Metro closed down fifteen years ago, but it still smelled like piss and shit; it was just less well lit now. My contact had told me to go to the far end of the platform and wait. So I waited. If the implant had been working it wouldn't have been so bad as I'd have at least had access to some waves, but left to my own devices I jumped at every movement, every shadow.

And people used to live like this all the time?

I forced myself to stand my ground. I was about to give up everything I had on a *Hail Mary* deal to get me back on the ladder. I couldn't fuck this up.

To say that I was a survivor of the '59 crash would be disingenuous. It's true that I still had a job twenty four hours after the magnetic pulse from the sun wiped out ninety percent of the infrastructure without warning, but I was still a victim; it just took longer for me to fall.

But I'm here now.

From where I stood I could see the tower where I used to spend my life; a needle like pinnacle, a fuck-you monument to the first half of the century when things were, if not exactly rosy, at least comfortable. Some, a few, of my co-workers were still there, still sorting data and disseminating it to anyone who would pay. Me, I was down with the dispossessed, hustling dream juice on corners and looking for an angle.

Tonight was the night it was all going to change for the better.

I first heard about the *biotes* in a bar down by the docks. Biotech at the cutting-edge, untested but already on sale if you knew who to ask. The *biotes* were said to be a genetically-engineered variant on the flatworm – only bigger, uglier and much more useful. They remember things. The chemicals in their bodies are analogous to the enzymes and neural transmitters of the human brain. They sit on the back of your neck, feeder slipped painlessly into the bloodstream, sensor into the medulla oblongata, and they feed. . . on blood and memories. Then there's the thing I was interested in; the by-product that only became apparent when you moved them between *hosts*. The *biotes* would keep feeding; but it was a two way process, and the original host's memories became accessible. . . to anyone with the money to pay for them.

I'd placed an order last week. I knew that there was an unwilling host involved, some poor sap, a wave trader pulled from his place in the scheme of things, fitted with a *biote* in some dark room for a week then discarded. I was trying not to think of him – survival of the fittest and all that happy shit. All I wanted was the chance for a step back on the ladder.

I was close to giving up when a shuffling figure appeared at the far end of the platform. At first I took him for a subway mole, but when he got closer I recognised my contact. Or rather, I didn't recognise him; the hard street-smart man I'd done business with the week before had gone, replaced by a zoned out moist-eyed *loser*. Too much dream-juice was my best guess, but I was past caring about others' predicaments. I held out my hand and he flash-swiped his payment. Just like that, everything I owned was gone. In exchange he handed over a moist lump of what felt like fresh beef and turned away.

"Hey wait. What do I do now?"

He turned back, slowly, as if moving underwater.

"Slap it on the back of your neck. And wait."

That was all the instruction I got, but as it turned out, it was all I needed.

*

Slapping it on the back of my neck was the easy part. In retrospect I should have waited until I got back to the fifty cubic-foot box I called home, but having paid my money, I took my chance. As I've said, it felt like a chunk of meat, but it was strangely warm to the touch, and a ripple ran through it as I lifted it behind my head. I felt the feeder needle slide in, moist heat at the nape of my neck.

Then I went away.

My head swam, and it seemed as if the walls of the subway melted and ran, receding into a great distance until there was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness. I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing existed save the dark and a pounding beat from below.

Shapes moved in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that capered and whirled as their dance grew ever more frenetic. I tasted salt water in my mouth, and was buffeted, as if by a strong, surging tide, but as the beat grew ever stronger I cared little. I gave myself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.

I came back lying in my box with no memory of having got there. I tongued the palate implant but nothing happened. Seems it wasn't just me that had *gone away*. My mind felt *heavy* with too much crammed in and too little space to accommodate it. I presumed that's what caused my blackout. I'd been warned there would be a period of *assimilation*; it was just a matter of riding it out until the new memories fused with my own. I counted myself lucky that instinct had brought me *home* – not for the first time either. Dream juice and I were old friends, and blackouts nothing new in my experience.

I had started to prepare for sleep when the first of the new memories *clicked* into place. I was on a beach, it was sunny, and there was a blonde at my side. None of these three were mine, but I had them now. I settled down and waited for more, happy in the knowledge that I'd spent my money well.

Over the next two weeks I *remembered* all the details of where to get the latest waves, how to pull them, and who would pay for them. I also knew who would pay highly for my new skills. I borrowed a suit from my last

friend, had a shave, and took to the spire. An hour later I left with a job but more than that, I was back in the game, back on the ladder.

Soon I was able to leave *the box* and move into an apartment on the thirtieth floor; still some way below where I once had been, but more than adequate – for now. My *donor* proved to have been nearly as good as me at identifying the high-rollers, and soon I had new clients, new credits rolling in on an hourly basis.

The dreams were a small price to pay, but they were becoming alarmingly more frequent and of longer duration each night, always the same ocean depths, always the dance in the dark.

I started to fear sleep. It got to the stage where, despite having been given dire warnings against trying, I attempted to remove the *biote*. I only tried once, but that was enough. At the first hint of a tug I was fed a new memory, a flash so vivid that it left me panting and sweaty for an hour. It is hard to describe what I *saw* in my mind; a rolling chaos where souls screamed, a city of stone in the deep blue yonder whose angles and geometry seemed somehow *wrong*, and the impression of movement as something stirred.

It left me nauseous and unwilling to try again.

But the dreams would not leave me alone. I took to other, extreme, forms of self-medication in an attempt to drown out the dream-time thoughts but that only served to dull my daytime mind to the extent that I started losing touch on the very job I'd given so much to attain.

Something had to give. . . and two weeks into the job matters came to a head.

I woke in the morning, not in my shiny new apartment block, but back in the box under the overpass. My hands were dirty, fingernails torn to the quick, and my shoulders ached as if I'd spent the night doing bench presses. Worse than that though, it felt like I had lost the *biote* as I couldn't feel the weight of it at my neck. A couple of probes with trembling hands proved me false – it was still there, but it was smaller, strangely shrunken and deflated. Even as I prodded at it I felt it *suck* at me, and swell beneath my fingers as it fed.

I managed to get home, cleaned up and into work only a few minutes late, but all morning I noticed I was drawing stares from the others around me. I

wasn't fitting in, wasn't part of the crowd. If I wasn't careful I'd be on that downward slope again all too soon.

I decided attack was the best policy. I got my work out of the way quickly, making enough credits that I could afford a few hours on my own time. I used it in searching for anything and everything known about the *biotes.*

It didn't take long.

I already knew it was genetically engineered. The fact that the source material was a mixture of flatworm and a strange tar-like substance found in Antarctica seemed neither here nor there. What did have me worried was that I could find no indication on any of the waves of the *biotes* patents. If they were to be brought into the mainstream, the paperwork should have been filed, the science should have been peer-reviewed, and federal approved medical tests would have been done. There was nothing.

I did find details on the initial research team. But the six scientists involved had all fallen off the grid, lost down a rabbit hole. All that remained of that research were scattered reports from ground level of how to buy the things on the black market; but I knew that already too.

There was only one further item of interest, but that was the one that had me worried. There were no waves, anywhere, from anyone attached to a *biote*. Either I had the only one left in existence. . . or something was happening to everyone else in my situation. I didn't particularly like either option.

*

The next night I took precautions before sleep. The *biote* might be in control of some of my memories, but I was in control of the pharmacology. I had more than enough experience to dose myself just enough to maintain a semi-waking state. I kept my day-clothes on and lay down on the bed.

I didn't have to wait long.

Although I could still see the walls of the room and the lights of the city beyond the balcony, I could *also* see dim shadows, dancing in the deep blue of some distant ocean. I felt the allure of the dance, felt the compulsion take me as I rose from the bed. I tried to fight it, but the *biote* had full control of my motor functions. I was a mere passenger as we went out of the apartment, down the elevator, and back to the places I had worked so hard to escape.

We went deep, down into the old subway to where dream-weed and sex are currency and the high pinnacle of commerce above is a mythic realm talked of only in whispers if at all. By now I saw that others walked around me, all slack-eyed and slightly *stiff* in their movements, as if unused to their own limbs. The tell tale bulge under their clothes at the neck told me that I had definitely been wrong about being the only *biote* carrier in existence. The fact that scores of us walked ever deeper into the subway did little to quell a growing apprehension.

When we finally stopped I realized I knew where I had been brought. We were in the deepest station of the old system, the one directly under the base of the towering spire. It had been abandoned even before the flare knocked the old-world to hell, the tube superceded by the above ground walkways. Things had been left to fester down here.

And it was immediately obvious that when we had moved out, something else had moved in. I felt it, a thumping rhythm in my head and gut, the beat of the dance in which we were held.

I was given no time to think. My *biote* took me into the main hall of the station and to where a wall of rubble marked where a tunnel had once been. I was put to work, and no amount of *pushing* mentally against the control had any effect. I shifted rubble and moved rock until I was too tired to do any more. My legs moved me to one side and a tall chap in a very expensive suit that was soon to be ruined took my place.

Tiredness washed over me, and I let the *biote* have its way. I fell into blackness where there was only the dance, the beat, and dancing shadows.

*

I woke back in the box, once again with clothes and hands in a state of disrepair. The *biote* also seemed to have suffered, being once more strangely limp and smaller than before. It quickly fed and became plump again, leaving me feeling drained and more than slightly *violated*.

I made my way back to the apartment, more aware than ever of the contrast between the depths and the heights. I got more strange looks when I finally got to work, but I was past caring by now. This had to stop before I was dragged back down.

The waves were little to no help. Whatever the *biotes* were up to, it wasn't on the radar of anyone that mattered up here. There was only one further

snippet of information, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Apparently the material from Antarctica that had gone into the *biotes* making was rather mysterious in itself, being capable of a degree of primitive intelligence and showing social interactions when in close contact with more of its kind. There was even a name for it, one that sounding outlandish to my modern mind. They called it *Shoggoth.*

I was getting nowhere. I considered informing the authorities, such as existed, but I knew well the futility of trying to get the system involved in anything *from below.* I may as well ask for the moon.

It quickly became a moot point anyway.

I came awake with a start, sitting at my desk and staring at a set of wave results I had no memory of compiling. What I did remember, and what was still offering me its seductive emptiness, was that I had been drifting, there in the blue beyond, dancing with the shadows. And, truthfully, at that precise moment I preferred there to here. I had to force my attention back to the job at hand, and it didn't help to find that I had *seemed* to be awake and answering questions all the time I had been lost in the dance. Doug two cubes over even complimented me on a particularly fine confluence of waves I – or rather the *biote* - had sent over the air

The *biote* was getting stronger. If anything could be done it would have to be soon.

I dug deeper, looking for possible connections. Aside from the disappearance of people with *biotes* I looked into other cases of people going off-grid, judging that there might be many who had got attached to a *biote* without telling anyone or having it noticed.

That's when the numbers started to frighten me; there were more than a thousand on that list, and a time-trend analysis showed the number to be growing at an exponential rate. When I cross-referenced my findings to a search of bodies found *below* there was a one-to-one correlation; people get a *biote*, people go missing a few weeks later, people turn up dead and used-up a month or so after that.

*

I resorted to more pharmacology, upping the dosage in an attempt to gain some kind of control over the *biote*'s activities. All I achieved was a clearer look at what was happening to me.

It started in the same manner as the night before; a call to action that I could not ignore as the *biote* took control of my faculties. My newly drugged state allowed me only a small amount of resistance, enough to make the walk down to the deeps drag but not enough to stop the descent.

Once again I was led to the deepest level in the old station under the spire. Work had obviously been continuing with some pace since my last visit. The blocked tunnel was almost clear, and even under the *biote's* control as I was, I smelled fresh air coming through from the other side; salty air.

The pull of the dance was much stronger now, and it was all I could do to resist its charms. I forced myself to remain aware as my body went to work shifting rock and rubble. After a time tiredness inevitably set in, but rather than give in to it, the drugs allowed me to watch.

My *biote* split with a moist tear I felt rather than heard. Half of its bulk fell to the ground at my feet and started to *slither* away, heading down into the depths of the newly opened tunnel. And deep in the tunnel something huge moved and trembled in anticipation.

It is hard to explain this next part; I have trouble coming to terms with it myself. But part of me was slithering down the dark tunnel with the *biote,* part of my consciousness, my soul if you will, sucked out, stolen and taken down into the dark. And as I slithered there, others slithered with me, tens of us, all intent on one task, like spermatozoa after a vast egg.

We found it in the bottom foundations of the spire, sprawled there like a huge cephalopod, tentacles wrapped around the columns that sustained the mighty works of men, a vast corpulent body shivering as we surged in joy and were assimilated, into the soft darkness, into the dance.

*

I woke back in the box in the morning, but there was now a curious doubling sensation; part of me was still down there, with the dweller in the darkness, dancing in the dark, perfectly at peace.

I considered making my way back to the office, but in truth I knew it was futile.

The dance will have me one way or the other. This way at least I get a choice in the matter.

Now excuse me, the man ahead has become tired. It is my turn to dig.

Carnacki – The Island of Doctor Munroe

The card of invitation arrived on Tuesday afternoon. "I have a new tale," was written on it, and that was more than enough encouragement for me to rearrange any plans I might have. On Friday evening I arrived at seven prompt at Carnacki's lodgings in Chelsea at 427, Cheyne Walk.

Carnacki took my coat and motioned me inside where I found the three others already there. It was not long before Carnacki, Arkwright, Jessop, Taylor and I were all seated at the dining table.

I was immediately thankful that I had only taken a light lunch, for Carnacki had surpassed even his own high culinary standards, treating us to some perfectly cooked grouse with mashed potatoes and turnips, all washed down with a particularly fine claret.

As usual talk was confined to inconsequential gossip until we retired to the parlor for after-dinner drinks and the telling of Carnacki's latest adventure. By the time we all got our glasses filled and our smokes lit we were on tenterhooks, most eager for the tale of his latest escapades.

He did not keep us waiting.

*

"As you chaps know," he began. "I have been in Scotland for some days. Indeed, this latest tale starts on the very morning after our last evening together.

"You will remember that the weather was beastly? It had not stopped raining all night, and I resigned myself to a Saturday spent indoors going over some research on a particularly obtuse passage in the Sigsand mss. I had just finished breakfast and was on my way to the library when there was a knock on the front door.

"On answering I found a small bedraggled chap standing there, looking most damp and forlorn. I ushered him in to the parlor, made him some tea,

and we each got a pipe going before I even got as far as enquiring after either his name or the reason for his visit.

"He started by handing me his card, which told me little beyond that he was Doctor John Munroe, from Inchlannan in Argyllshire. He offered no further information at that point, and I was starting to worry that I might have to resort to opening the Scotch.

"It soon turned out he was going to be forthcoming all of his own accord. I quickly found out that Doctor Munroe was one of those voluble Scotsmen who seem to enjoy the sound of their own voice above anything else, and he wasted no time in assuring me of the importance, nay, the necessity, of his visit.

"'Let me just start by saying that I am a scientist, Mr. Carnacki,' he said. 'I do not hold any truck with all that *mumbo-jumbo* nonsense about haunts and bogles.'

"He held up a hand before I could question his impertinence.

"'There was no offence intended. I have heard nothing but good things about your particular expertise, sir. Indeed, I have come to implore you to accompany me on a trip to Scotland, where I think I have stumbled upon something that will interest you greatly.'

"As you are aware, I am an inquisitive cove at the best of times, and I was already of half a mind to join him before he went on to explain further.

"'You see, Mr. Carnacki, I am something of an inventor, dabbling in one of the more esoteric branches of science, the transmission of signals through the *aether*. I hope in the near future to perfect a method of wireless transmission of images. Indeed I have already started to have some small success.'

"'Very admirable, I am sure," I replied. 'But I cannot see how that concerns me?"

"Once again he held up a hand.

"'As I said,' he continued. 'I have been experimenting with sending signals into the *aether*. What I have neglected to tell you is simple, but I believe may be of the utmost importance.'

"He took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to me.

"'I have started to receive replies,' he said.

"As I read, I realized I knew exactly what I was looking at. Below a set of three pentagrammic circles was a transcribed inscription.

"Ri linn dioladh na beatha, Ri linn bruchdadh na falluis, Ri linn iobar na creadha, Ri linn dortadh na fala.

"It was the very same ancient chant I have used several times to enforce my will on the denizens of the Outer Darkness, and I can tell you it gave me a bally shock to see it on that sheet of paper. I have never before seen it written outside the Sigsand Mss, and indeed I have long thought that I might be the only person to have ever used it for the purpose for which it was written.

"'I see you recognise it,' Munroe said with a grim smile. 'I was hoping you would. Now do you see why I have come to you?'

"I was starting to understand and, despite my apprehension, was more than a tad curious as to how he, an avowed scientist, came to be in possession of such a piece of arcane wisdom. I agreed there and then to accompany the man, and early the next morning we set out for the West of Scotland."

*

"The journey proved to be somewhat tortuous, involving as it did a train journey to Glasgow, a shorter, suburban, journey to Helensburgh, then a lengthy carriage ride through Argyll. At least my companion was amiable enough, if a tad inclined to speak too highly of himself when recounting his many achievements.

"We spent that night in a hotel in Tighnabruaich, where the venison was good and the Scotch better. I noticed that my companion did not speak to the locals beyond the basic needs of ordering our food, drink and sleeping arrangements. I thought at first it was the reticence you sometimes see in scientific coves when confronted by non-learned members of the public, but I soon came to see that, rather than him shunning the locals, it was in fact the other way round. None of the patrons of the hotel so much as looked in our direction and when one, an elderly gentleman, finally did so, it was to show us, with forked fingers, the old sign against the evil eye.

"'Ignore them,' Munroe said when he saw me looking. 'It's just fear and ignorance at something their tiny brains cannot comprehend.'

"I was coming to like my travelling companion less and less with each passing hour, but I was too intrigued as to the origin of transcription of the

old chant to give up the chase at that point. Would that I had, for it may have saved considerable grief further down the line.

"As it was, I was relieved to get to my bed, and get some respite from the good Doctor's constant self-praise; an affliction that seemed to me to border on delusion.

"I was not, however, given much chance to rest, for scarcely had my head hit the pillow than came a soft knock on my room door. When I opened it I was somewhat surprised to see the elderly gentleman I had noticed in the hotel bar. He gave me no time to speak.

"'Do not go out onto yon island, sir,' he said without preamble. 'It were a bad spot afore he came, and 'tis a dashed sight worse now. 'Tis your soul I am worried for, so take heed.'

"And with that cryptic warning he left once more, and I retired to my bedchamber for a smoke and a think.

"In truth I was starting to regret not bringing my protective devices along on the trip. Munroe had assured me that they would not be needed, that matters were purely *scientific*. But the elderly chap's warning had not sounded scientific at all, being much more in my normal line of work. Now here I was, stuck on a remote corner of Scotland, and all I had by way of defense was my own wits and my reading copy of the Sigsand mss, the one that is always in my luggage no matter where I travel.

"A pipe of my own tobacco calmed me somewhat and finally the rigors of the day's travel, combined with the Scotch I had consumed over dinner, sent me into a deep undisturbed sleep."

*

"The next day dawned bright and clear. And it was then that I got my first inking that Munroe might, in fact, be justified in his assertions of remarkable invention. After a fine breakfast of herring and oatmeal he led me to a small stone jetty and the boat which was docked there. At first I took it for little more than the standard class of fishing vessel so common along these shorelines. I was, however, in for a rather rude awakening, for no sooner had we left the jetty than there was a most frightful roar and the boat started to travel across the Sound of Bute at a frightening speed, sending a white foaming wake behind us.

"Munroe laughed at my obvious discomfort.

"'Go below, Mr. Carnacki. You will see that it is not magic or superstition that propels this craft, but the proper appliance of science.'

"I did as requested and descended to what, in a fishing vessel, would be the engine room. In this craft however, there was the most extraordinary contraption. I recognized the small steam engines at either end, but even my untrained eye knew that they were not large enough to drive the boat at its current speed. The rest of the mechanism was a dizzying labyrinth of copper, cogs and, in particular, massive heavy springs bunched in tight coils that alternately tightened and released in a manner that I guessed was the driving force for our speed.

"Munroe refused to confirm or deny my supposition, merely smiled.

"'This is only the first of many things I have to show you,' was all he would say, and no matter how much I tried, I could coax nothing further from him. I stood beside him at the helm and smoked a pipe as we cruised at speed through the Sound of Bute.

"Eventually, after nearly an hour, I saw that our heading was straight towards a low-lying island on the horizon. What I took for smoke rose in a tall plume from the center, and the shoreline around the perimeter seemed shrouded in thin mist. As we got closer I saw it was not mist as such, but more like steam. And on approach to land I started to discern, even above the sound of our own vessel, a rhythmic pulse, like a great drum beating. Keeping time with that drumbeat, plumes of steam shot from vents in the surface, adding a whistling cacophony to what was already an almost deafening hubbub.

"And suddenly I took a blue funk. Now you chaps know that I have stood in many a sticky spot in the course of my activities. But rarely have I felt such a sense of *wrongness* like that which I encountered on approach to the island of Doctor Munroe. Every fiber of my being wanted to run, and it was all I could do to stand in place. As it was, my jaws clamped so tight on the stem of my pipe that I'm afraid that I have gouged one of my best briars beyond repair.

"Munroe seemed to guess my discomfort.

"'Never fear, Mr. Carnacki. There are no bogles here. I assure you, there are only the products of my invention, and nothing to frighten a sophisticated gentleman such as yourself.'

"Munroe brought the boat into a small harbor, tied it up expertly, and led me along a short jetty to the island proper. The sound was now almost deafening, and I felt clammy. The air was hot, almost tropically so, and so damp that it felt difficult to breathe.

"'Let's get you inside, old boy,' Munroe said. 'We will be more comfortable there.'

"I could see no *inside*, only earth and rock. Munroe smiled and walked forward. He put his hand into a crevice on a rock face and twisted. Suddenly there was more steam, more noise. The rock moved aside with a loud scraping roar, revealing a cave beyond, a passageway leading into darkness.

"'Welcome to the future,' Munroe said, and led me inside."

*

Carnacki paused to knock out his pipe on the grate. He did not move to rise from his seat, so we all knew this was a momentary delay in his tale rather than a stop for drink replenishment. That did not, however, stop Arkwright who, as usual, was full of questions.

"I say, old man," he said. "This isn't your usual kind of tale at all. Where are the. . . what did the chap call them? *Haunts and bogles?* I'm afraid I am finding this whole affair rather dull. Those science chappies just seem to suck all the fun out of everything."

Carnacki smiled sadly.

"I assure you, old friend," he said. "There will be more than enough meat in the tale to satisfy you. We are starting to get to the heart of it even now."

That placated Arkwright just long enough for Carnacki to begin again.

*

"There was a low-slung, four-wheeled contraption at the entrance.

"'Just put your suitcase in there,' Munroe said. 'It will get delivered to your room while we do the tour.'

"I did as I was asked. The carriage *whuffed,* and *puffed* and chugged away from us into the tunnel. Munroe grinned hugely and walked after it. I had little choice but to follow.

"The next hour was one of the strangest I have ever spent. The interior of the island seemed to be a huge, hollowed out, cave system. There were no

windows, just a long series of corridors between rough-hewn caverns. Each of the caverns was home to what Munroe called his *experiments* – most of which looked to be variations on labor-saving devices, from machines to launder clothes to industrial scale tools for cutting wood, welding metal or weaving cloth. And all were powered by variations of the contraption I had seen on board the boat that brought us here; driven by steam, clockwork cogs and tightly wound coils.

"I still had little conception as to why I had been brought here. But that all changed when we entered the final, and by far the largest, chamber. Light came in from high above, through a large domed glass roof that had been expertly placed over what was obviously cave of some antiquity. The walls were covered in a finely carved script that I did not recognize, but I well knew the *sense* of the place, for I had stood in several such rooms before.

"It was no less than a summoning area for the denizens of the Outer Darkness.

"'Once again, I see I do not really have to explain,' Munroe said.

But that could not have been further from the truth -- the contents of that cave had left me in a state of some confusion. The space was dominated by a large example of the spring-engines I had already seen, one which seemed to be hooked up to a massive set of organ pipes, the likes of which I have only previously seen in a church.

"'I am sorry to have deceived you, Mr. Carnacki. As you can see, my experiments deal with something rather more esoteric than the transmission of images through space. But I had to bring you here to see this for yourself. I found this place some ten years ago,' Munroe said. 'And at first I wasn't quite sure what I had. I spent long months trying to unravel the secrets of the script. Then, one weekend when I spent too long here and was forced to spend the night camped out in the cave, the answer came to me in a dream.

"'The script you see inscribed on the walls is not a language at all. It is a rhythmic notation, like a musical score. Not only that, but my dream also showed me what was required to unlock the secret.'

"He waved towards the organ pipes.

"'Using the appropriate chords, in the right rhythm, the wonders of this place were finally revealed to me.'

"I was starting to fear that I knew, only too well, what these *wonders* might be. But before I could stop him, Munroe moved to stand beside the spring-engine. He flicked a switch. The cave filled with throbbing chords that boomed and echoed all around.

"An answering pounding arose from below.

"I felt it first through the soles of my feet, but soon my whole frame shook, vibrating in time with the rhythm. My head swam, and it seemed as if the very walls of the cave melted and ran. The light from above receded into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing existed save the dark and the pounding beat.

"Shapes moved in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that capered and whirled as the dance grew ever more frenetic.

"I tasted salt water in my mouth, and was buffeted, as if by a strong, surging tide, but as the beat grew ever stronger I cared little. I gave myself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.

"Soft voices rose to join the beat, a chant I recognised well.

"*Ri linn dioladh na beatha, Ri linn bruchdadh na falluis, Ri linn iobar na creadha, Ri linn dortadh na fala."*

"I know not how long I wandered, there in the space between. I forgot myself, forgot Munroe, lost in a place where only the rhythm mattered. And I do believe I would be there yet if Munroe had not brought proceedings to a halt. The chords faded, and slowly my senses returned to me.

"Munroe smiled.

"'Welcome to the future,' he said.

*

Carnacki stopped and rose from his chair. We all, from long experience, knew that he had reached a natural break in his story, giving us a chance to refill our glasses and light fresh smokes. As ever, Arkwright was keen to press Carnacki with more questions but our host was an old hand at avoiding anything that might give away details of his story before he was ready to tell it.

When we settled back in our seats it was with a growing sense of anticipation and curiosity as to what manner of thing Carnacki had encountered out there in the remote islands off the West Coast of Scotland.

*

"I was to get a full picture of Munroe's plans later that evening over dinner. But before that I was given a full tour of the cavern system. Certainly, there were mechanical wonders aplenty, and by Jove, some of them would most certainly change the way life is lived in this fascinating modern world of ours. But I could not but feel a rising apprehension as he showed me yet another contraption of steam, clockwork and springs.

"'I suppose this one is going to revolutionise agriculture?' I said, with somewhat more than usual sarcasm I am afraid to say, for I was becoming weary by this time.

"Munroe shook his head.

"'No,' he said. 'But it will bring me enough money to continue my work.'

He would say no more on the matter. . . not at that point anyway. I was shown to a very well appointed bed-chamber where I was able to wash and change before joining him for dinner in a room that would not look out of place at the Diogenes Club.

"Over a fine meal of salmon and new potatoes Munroe finally let me in to his secret, one that I had come to suspect during the course of my tour.

"'Once again, I have not been entirely honest with you, Mr. Carnacki,' he said as we lit our pipes. 'I am not so much an *inventor*, as a discoverer. All the engines and contraptions you have seen, all the wonders of technology I have shown you, have come to me in dreams while standing in the main chamber. I have come to believe that there is an intelligence there, one that seeks to teach us, to mould our future development. Just think of the world we may build if we but only listen to it?'

"That was exactly what I *was* thinking, although I am dashed sure that my own thoughts were nowhere near as full of naiveté and delusion as those of Munroe.

"'That there is intelligence. . . that is a point on which I have no doubt,' I said, being careful with my words. 'But I am certain that it does not have a benign interest in our future. There are dark things in the beyond, Doctor Munroe, things that once walked this planet, long before we did, things that wish to once again take control of their former dominion. Tell me. What kind of world would they have us build?'

"I listened as he extolled the virtues of mass-agriculture, of cheap transport for all, of workers freed from drudgery to explore simpler, more artistic pursuits. I scarcely heard him. In my mind's eye all I could see were vast industrial wastelands of hissing steam and clockwork; fumes rising over blasted heaths where vegetation was a nuisance rather than a necessity. I saw a world where mankind's place was relegated to little more than that of a maintenance engineer for the factories. And in the sky overhead, dark things hung like great crows, cackling in amusement at our endless stupidity.

"What kind of world would you have us build?

"The question rang long in my head as I dragged myself off to bed and a night spoiled by dreams of steam and clockwork."

*

"Over breakfast I finally found the reason I had been brought to the island.

"'It is to do with that incantation,' Munroe said. 'I hear it every time I enter the dream state. It's is a bally nuisance if truth be told, for it seems to block the free flow of communication with the intelligences beyond.'

"'I am sure of it,' I replied. 'Indeed I am sure that the chamber itself is little more than a containment vessel, a prison if you like, to hold what you call the *intelligence.* Trust me, Doctor. Trust my experience. There is no good to be gained from further exploration in this area.'

"'No good? Let me show you different, Mr. Carnacki,' Munroe said.

"He led me back through the cavern system to the chamber containing the equipment that had mystified me earlier – the one I had thought might be some kind of agricultural implement.

"'Do you know what this is?' Munroe asked, placing a hand on a long copper casing that had drill-bits at one end and the most elaborate set of coils, springs and gears at the other. I confessed my utter ignorance.

"'It is cheap power for all,' he said. 'No less than a way to fuel the entire future at minimal cost. This *digger* will bore into the ground to great depths, and, along with a cunning plumbing method I have also been shown, allow the tapping of the heat from the very core of the planet; heat that will fuel every engine, every factory, every country. Think on it, Carnacki.'

"I was indeed thinking on it. I could clearly envisage the drill as it bit into the earth, burrowing ever deeper into the darkness. But I could not see any

plumbing, nor any future. Instead what I saw were vast plumes of magma, rising up through newly formed tunnels to spout high in the air, sending noxious clouds to fill the sky and scalding lava to cover the earth. And once again, hanging above like a cloak of death, the black wings and echoing laughter of the old landlords as they reclaimed their tenancy in a world once more returned to its primal beginnings.

"'What can I do to convince you?' Munroe asked.

"'Believe me,' I said. 'I am more than convinced enough.'

He smiled, taking my reply as assent for what was coming next. I did not dissuade him of the notion.

"'Then you know how to nullify the chant? How to open us up to a full and complete passage of information with the intelligence?'

"I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and let him lead me back to the main chamber."

*

Carnacki broke off again, and on looking in his eyes I saw that our old friend was most troubled.

"You do not have to continue, old boy," I said. "Not if it is too painful a tale to tell?"

Carnacki sucked hard on his pipe, then waved me aside.

"It is a moral conundrum I have wrestled with since my return," he said. "And I am resolved to tell the tale. I will leave you chaps to ask yourselves what you might have done in my place. As for me, I can only hope and pray I made the right decision."

He took some time getting a fresh pipe going before continuing.

*

"Munroe, by this time, had become rather excited at the prospect of being able to remove the influence of the incantation from his so-called *dream state,* and insisted that we make an attempt on the matter there and then.

"In truth I was in no mood to wait, for I had made up my own mind on a course of action, one that I was not entirely sure I had the courage to follow through on. Waiting any longer would only have weakened my resolve.

"'Are you ready?' he asked me.

"I did not trust myself to speak, merely nodded my head.

"Once more, Munroe moved to stand beside the spring-engine. He flicked the switch and the cave filled with the sound of throbbing chords.

"As before an answering pounding arose from below.

"My head swam and I felt the allure of the *dance* pull at me. It needed all of my will to resist. I saw that Munroe had no such qualms. He stood still, hands at his side, face raised to where the light came in the high dome, eyes closed as if in ecstatic supplication.

"Voices rose to join the beat, the chant I had recognised previously.

"*Ri linn dioladh na beatha, Ri linn bruchdadh na falluis, Ri linn iobar na creadha, Ri linn dortadh na fala.*

"By now my suspicions had been confirmed. This chamber was indeed little more than a prison, Munroe's *intelligences* were the inmates. . . and the chant was the lock that kept it closed.

"I heard the *inmates* whisper to Munroe, promising a bright shining future, showing pastoral scenes of a happy world. I saw designs and diagrams of more machines, more clockwork and springs. I had not a single clue as to their purpose. But I knew that I had to do *something* to prevent them from ever becoming reality.

"I brought to mind a ritual from the Sigsand mss, one I have never before had a need to use, and one I pray I never have to use again. Raising my voice to carry above the hubbub I called out the chant. I will not repeat the words here, for to do so would put you chaps in the utmost peril, and to have uttered it even once is almost more than a man can bear.

"Suffice to say, it worked. But not as Munroe intended, for instead of opening the lock and releasing the *inmates,* I had done something far worse.

"I summonsed screaming chaos from the Outer Darkness itself, calling it up from beyond to do my bidding.

"The cave started to dim, as if a veil was being drawn over the sun. The whispers of the *inmates* turned to screams, shrieks so hideous that I thought my ears might burst. The dark began to swirl and spin, spiraling columns of blackness that danced over and around us in ever more frenzied motion.

"Munroe shook himself, as if coming out of a trance.

"'Is it working?' he asked.

"I started to pull him away towards the exit."

"'All too well," I replied. 'Come away. It is over.'

He laughed at me.

"'No. It is only just begun.'

He walked to the center of the chamber and threw another switch. The organ pipes squealed even louder. The dark swirls gathered into deeper, more violent spirals, whirling dervishes that sucked up anything that wasn't fixed to the floor, crushing and mangling the copper plate, cogs and gears of Munroe's creations and turning them into fuel for ever faster destruction.

"I backed away as the dark swelled over me. I muttered protective incantations under my breath, knowing even as I did so that I could not waste any more words on Munroe, for any pause would have meant joining him there in the chaos.

"The last I saw of him as I backed off into the corridor was his ecstatic face raised high, the huge copper organ pipes thrown, dancing, in the air around him as the blackness swelled high above. . . and fell on him."

"I only just managed to make it to the jetty as the caves collapsed in on themselves and I'm afraid I lost all of my luggage in the chaos, but that was the furthest thing from my mind at that point.

"I had a frantic minute's worry as I tried to figure out how to pilot the boat, and I had only just managed to exit the small harbor before the whole island fell in on itself in a great gout of hissing steam. At the last a dark shape seemed to loom over the foaming waters, one that was torn into wisps by the wind and scattered even as the seas calmed.

"Of Munroe's island, not a single trace was left.

"I managed to get back to Tighnabruaich later that evening, and instructed the locals to burn the boat and anything they found on it. They were only to keen to comply, removing the very last vestiges of Munroe and his experiments from the face of the earth."

*

Carnacki stopped.

He went quiet, and I thought he was done, but when he looked up there were fresh tears of anguish in his eyes.

"Do you see, old friends? I have become that which I have fought against these long years. I have used the powers of the Outer Darkness to further

my own ends. What say you? Am I to be eternally damned?"

Arkwright spoke for us all.

"Do not fret old chap," he said. "If what you related is indeed true, then you have spared us from a bleak future; one in which the Outer Darkness conspires to remake the world into a place suitable for all the *haunts and bogles* to inhabit."

Carnacki was inconsolable.

"But have I? Have I really?"

On my way back along the Embankment I saw a large group of workers lower a great machine into the new tunnel workings for the Central Line enhancement program. The huge drill-bit at one end looked like a giant, ravenously hungry, mouth.

Carnacki's last words stayed with me all the way home.

The Terror That Came to Dounreay

I didn't know what to expect. All they'd said was that it was a *matter of national security.* Just what they wanted with a fifty-year-old doctor of Biology with a gammy leg and a drink problem I wasn't told. I was given a train ticket and a contact name and sent off on an interminably slow train to Thurso.

Once there I was met by a sergeant and a truck -- both of them well past their best. We rattled along an unpaved road for what seemed like hours, coming to a sudden halt at a manned checkpoint. A large sign at the side proclaimed the place to be Dounreay Site, AEC. That didn't help me much. There was also lettering underneath, but that was mostly covered by a strange construction of leaf and twig that had been hung over it.

An attendant waved a torch and a gun in my face, I showed him my paperwork and we were allowed through to a cordoned off area of Nissen

huts with a towering concrete structure beyond.

The whole site lay along the top of what looked to be a raised beach, with the largest building clustered closest to the sea. A fogbank hung a mile offshore and moonlight danced in rocky coves. In other circumstances I might have found the spot calming, but I was not in the best of moods after my journey.

Without further ado I was marched inside one of the huts to meet the commander of the base. I'm afraid the Colonel, a stiff little man with a stiffer little moustache, didn't take to me. From what I understood of my short briefing, I was seconded to this unit to *'do my bit against the Soviets'*. But by the time his orderly led me, via a warren of corridors through and between the maze of Nissen huts, into a lab that butted onto the concrete block, I was still none the wiser. It was only when I was introduced to the head of the team that I began to have some inkling as to why I had been summonsed.

I knew Professor Rankin by reputation as an iconoclast, a visionary. . . and as mad as a bag of badgers. We'd worked together for a brief period during the war, and last I'd heard he had gone over to the Yanks for a huge stipend at one of the West Coast think tanks. I never expected to meet him here on a remote Scottish shoreline. His unruly mop of white hair shook as he grasped my hand. He was as thin as a rake, but his grip was as hard as cold steel.

"Ballantine. And not a minute too soon. Come over here, man. You need to see this."

He dragged me over to a long trestle covered with electronic gear; all lights, switches, meters and dials.

"You know this isn't my thing," I started, but he was insistent.

"Just look."

He flicked a switch. Lights started to flash, meters started to swing.

"What am I looking for?" I said after several minutes.

"Look closer."

I was at a loss. Clearly there was something important here I was meant to understand, but for the life of me it just looked like a series of lights and meters. It was only when I gave up looking for an answer that one came to

me. I had to squint to see it, but it was there, a persistent flickering shadow that played over the instruments. As elusive as smoke in wind.

Rankin leaned over and switched off the equipment. Now that I knew what I was looking for I could see it as it dispersed, rising away from the electronic gear.

"What the hell was that?"

Rankin smiled, but there was no humour in it. He looked to be more angry than anything else.

"That's what I'm hoping you'll tell us," he said. "Come on, I've got some Scotch in my hut. Let's see what we can do about getting some of it inside us."

*

First of all I had to get myself settled. I was given a bunk in a dormitory-sized hut occupied mostly by squaddies who were already either bedding down for the night or preparing for night shift guard duty.

"What are they guarding against?" I asked Rankin once I had joined him in his quarters. He had a small hut to himself, and had done his best to make it appear homely. Shelves filled with technical books filled the walls, and a pair of armchairs had been arranged beside a cast iron stove that filled the room with heat. Rankin poured two generous measures of Scotch, handed me one and waited until I got a pipe lit before starting.

"I don't suppose you know anything about what we're doing here?" he said in reply to my question

I shook my head.

"Top secret stuff, I'm afraid," he continued. "And the Colonel will have me shot if I say too much. But let's just say that inside all that concrete there's an atomic facility. We're testing the effect of different doses of radiation on a variety of materials."

"Why?" I asked.

He raised an eyebrow.

"You're not *that* naive, Ballantine. You've seen the guards and the guns. This is, first and foremost, a military operation."

I thought about that for a while as I got some of his, admittedly excellent, Scotch inside me.

"So, why me? And what did I just see?"

"One answers the other," he said, somewhat cryptically. "You specialise in exotic forms of life, don't you? Well this one seems to be as exotic as it gets."

"That wasn't life," I said, but stopped when I saw the look in his eyes.

"It grows, it moves under its own volition and it shows signs of intelligence. You tell me what it is, Ballantine."

He got up and poured more Scotch for the two of us. I wasn't about to complain. He sighed deeply when he sat down again.

"It started when we got the reactor going," he said. "My design, my baby, I had to be here for the big day, had to be the one hitting the switch. And so it was that I was the one who first noticed it. . . the only one that first time. I put it down to stress, but soon after that the night watch started to get twitchy and reports filtered through of badly scared men and *ghoulies* in the lab. I took to keeping watch myself, monitoring its behaviour.

"Oh yes, Ballantine. It has behaviour. I study it, and it studies us. It never strays far from the reactor core, and seems most interested in the control board. It has never done any damage, as far as can be seen. But, and here's the thing that has the Top Brass worried, Ballantine. . . it is growing."

*

So began the strangest week of my life. I spent most of it on the night shift in the lab, and my days on the hard dormitory bed, trying to grab some sleep while the installation worked on around me. The only booze to be had was what I could scrounge from Rankin and after several days of no progress in my *investigation* he cut me off.

It was on the first Saturday following my arrival that I decided to take a walk in to town; I needed to clear my head after some peculiar events the previous night, and a long walk on the sea cliffs seemed the best solution. The guard at the gate refused to let me leave, showing me instead to the Colonel's hut.

There I had to listen to a long lecture about the importance of secrecy, and I was left in no doubt that the Colonel believed our *intruder* to be a device of Russian origin.

"And I will have no hesitation of blowing it to Kingdom Come if it comes to that."

With one final admonishment against talking to the locals, he gave me a daily pass, told me to be back by seven p.m., and I was finally allowed to leave.

It was one of those typically Scottish days where the sun only comes out sporadically between long periods of fog and drizzle. But I scarcely noticed. My mind was still reeling over the events of the night watch, and I let my feet follow the road while I tried to make sense of what I had seen.

I have said that Rankin was not pleased with *progress*. That is because there had been none. I had *observed* the behavior of what we were now calling *the entity*, but had gleaned no new information.

Last night that had all changed.

As before I stood in front of the control panel and flicked the switch. And as before, the thing seemed to *seep* out of the concrete wall that housed the reactor core. What was different this time was the size. It had more than doubled, and seemed somehow more solid. Two long tendrils, like spectral arms, reached out towards me from the main mass and a chill seized the length of my spine. The squaddie who, until now, had stood quietly at the door let out a shriek and left at a run, but I was unable to move, frozen into immobility as *something* rifled through my mind as if it were little more than a filing cabinet. Memories I thought were long forgotten bubbled unbidden to the surface only to be tossed aside and discarded.

And so it went, for what seemed to be an eternity. Until we came to my holiday experiences in the Mediterranean. I relived hot days on the ocean in a succession of small boats, but when we came to my time spent snorkeling among tumbled ruins the rifling through my brain stopped, and I experienced, all over again, almost in slow motion, my descents into blue deeps.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the thing seemed to leave me. A thin mist hovered above the instrument board for several seconds then drifted off, once again soaking through the concrete until I was left quite alone. It was long minutes before I could bring myself to move, and even then all I could manage was to light a cigarette with a very shaky hand.

Now, out on the road in the cold light of day, I started to wonder whether I had imagined the whole thing. . . whether it was merely a spot of *Delirium Tremens* brought on by my relative abstinence of the past week.

I knew one thing for sure though.

I needed a drink.

*

It was a longish walk into Thurso, and my bad knee flared in pain with each step towards the end of it, but it was well worth it, as I immediately stumbled upon an open pub, and made myself comfortable on a tall stool at the bar.

For the first hour or so I managed to stick to some of their strong, malty beer, but the siren call of the Scotch was not long escaped. By mid afternoon I felt comfortably numb and finally started to forget the events of the night before.

That was all to change again when the singing started.

I hadn't been aware that the place had filled up around me, being too preoccupied with my own thoughts and the booze. I was therefore rather surprised to turn around and find a busy bar, with a band setting up in the corner. Surprise turned to cold fear when they launched without preamble into their first song.

She sleeps in the spaces to be found in between,

She sleeps, and she dreams, of the sights she has seen.

I felt the cold chill seize my spine, and *the entity* was there again, looking out of my eyes, listening to what I was hearing. It wasn't in control of me, for I was able to lift my glass and drain a stiff measure of Scotch. But this was no case of the DTs. It watched through me as the band continued, and the whole audience in the bar sang along.

She dreams of the lands she has ruled as a queen,

And the sleeping god is dreaming where she lies.

I felt a *surge* of emotion well up in me, something I might have described as joy if I'd had any experience of it. As the song reached its climax it became almost overwhelming in intensity.

She dreams of her lord in the space in between,

And the sleeping god is dreaming where she lies.

The bar fell silent, and I remembered to breathe. An old man turned and spoke to me.

"You've seen her, haven't you?"

"Who?" I managed to say.

"The *Cailleach*, the old queen. Whatever it is you lot are doing up there, don't stop. You're bringing her back to us."

He turned back in rapt attention as the band started up again.

In the fire, the queen will come.

The chill threatened to grip me again. I downed what was left of my Scotch in one hasty gulp and staggered out into the growing dusk.

*

I woke lying face up at the side of the road, staring at a star-filled sky overhead, with no memory of anything after leaving the bar. I will admit that, in itself, it wasn't an unusual occurrence for me to have a blackout after drinking. But what was unusual was the sense of *doubling* I still felt in my mind, as if something squatted in there, watching my every move.

I got up, checked my bearings, and started a long trudge back to the installation. I knew I was in trouble. I had obviously passed the extent of the time covered by my pass, and I suspected that the Colonel was not a man given to leniency. It was with some surprise that I passed through the barricade at the gate with no further fuss, although I saw by a clock on the gatehouse wall that it was already past nine.

"Away in you go, sir," the Scottish squaddie said. "There's a big fuss on up at the block. I dinna think they'll notice you're a wee bit late."

I fully intended to creep quietly into my billet and sleep the rest of the night away, but as I got closer I heard that there was indeed a *fuss* up at the block. An alarm sounded loud and clear in the seaside air. Soldiers stood, guns raised, in a jagged line near the front of the building. I checked myself for sobriety, decided I was just about okay, and headed for the lab.

Inside, the place was in turmoil. The Colonel and Rankin stood over three soldiers who lay on the floor, staring sightlessly upward; obviously alive, yet obviously somewhere else. I started to have an inkling of what might have happened. It quickly turned to understanding as the thing inside me *surged* again. It left me in a wave of cold and sudden sadness that felt like mourning. At the same time a white smoke rose from the three men on the ground and rose upward to join whatever it was that had been inside me. The men started to move, as if coming out of a dream, but my gaze was taken with what was going on overhead.

Rankin went white, and the Colonel let out a yelp that he managed to quell just before it turned into a scream. A gray-white mist, almost solid now, hung in the air above us. Once again it drifted over the instrument panel.

"Get away from there," the Colonel shouted. He un-holstered his pistol, and fired three shots into the thickest part of *the entity.* The bullets had no effect, passing straight through and *pinging* off the corrugated iron roof above. The officer went to fire again, but Rankin put a hand on his arm.

"Wait," he said.

As it happened, there was nothing to wait for. The thick mist rose up and away, drifted towards the concrete wall of the reactor chamber, and again sank through it.

"After it," the Colonel shouted, but once again Rankin stayed his hand.

"You know as well as I do that we can't get in there without suiting up. Proper procedure must be followed."

"But that takes at least an hour," the Colonel said. "Who knows what it might be up to in there?"

"Indeed," Rankin replied. "And who knows what we might learn from it, given the chance?"

"Learn? There'll be no more *learning* here. I think we've had quite enough of that."

For once, I was in agreement with the Colonel, but that scarcely mattered, for several minutes later I found myself placed in handcuffs.

"Put him in a cell," the Colonel said. "I'll speak to him when he's sober."

"No sense in arguing," Rankin said softly as they led me away. "We all saw where that thing came from. Now he'll need to know where it has been."

*

I spent the remainder of that night in a cold, draughty, cell that sat perched on the cliff by the shore. Waves crashed on rocks, gulls cried. . . but no one came to talk to me. I ran out of tobacco sometime around midnight, and managed two hours of fitful sleep between then and dawn. My head hurt, I felt sick to my stomach, and my theory as to what happened the night before was threatening to throw me into the depths of despair. When the Colonel finally called on me the next morning, I was not in the best of moods.

And things did not improve when they led me to the interrogation room. At least they fed and watered me before the questioning started, but after that it was a long day of answering the same things, over and over as they attempted to pry a lie from me. I tried to tell them that I didn't remember anything, but they were having none of it.

It was late afternoon before they relented. Over my first, most welcome, smoke of the day I tried to explain the theory I was forming to the Colonel, but he was too angry to even listen.

"The ravings of a drunk do not concern me," he said. "You, sir, are a threat to National Security, and will be off this base as soon as we get to the bottom of whatever is going on."

"Let me speak to Rankin," I said finally. "I'll tell him what I know."

The Colonel was suspicious at that, but he had seen that his own tactics were getting him nowhere. Finally, just as dusk was settling in again, Rankin was allowed in to see me.

*

The Professor seemed almost embarrassed as he sat opposite me. He took out a hip flask and handed it across the table. Despite the fact that I wanted a drink more than I ever had before, I let it sit there. My first statement confused him further.

"Tell me about atomic theory," I said. "Is it true that we're mostly made up of empty space?"

"That's a bit of a gross simplification of a lot of very complex science. . . " he started.

"But, in essence, I'm right?"

"In essence," he agreed, grudgingly.

"And this reactor you have built here. . . it manipulates basic atomic structure at the lowest levels to get its results."

"Again, that's. . . "

"I know," I said, and managed a smile, although I felt far from any sense of good humour. "A gross simplification. But still, essentially true?"

"Where is all this leading?" Rankin said. "The Colonel wants you on the next train out of Thurso, and I'm afraid I can't help you unless you tell me what you know."

So I told him everything, from the time *the entity* started rifling through my brain until I woke, face up in the ditch.

"I think it has to do with the line in the song," I said softly. '*She sleeps in the spaces to be found in between.'* I think that's where this thing is from. . . the spaces between atoms; the part of the Universe we cannot see. Somehow, your experiments here have released it, woken it up from its long sleep."

To his credit, Rankin took me seriously, at least partially.

"I can understand that we *might* be releasing some form of *energy* we haven't seen before," he said. "But I cannot countenance anything resembling *intelligence* arising from that source. As for all this guff about the folk song and a myth of a *dreaming god*? Really, Ballantine, I expected better of you."

"And I expect the culture from where that folk song originally spread was rather more technically advanced than we have ever given them credit for," I said. "I will stand by my hypothesis until it is proved false. It fits the facts as we currently understand them."

"Let us say you are right," Rankin replied. "What does this *entity* want?"

"I doubt it *wants* anything, not in the way we think in any case. It lives, it feeds, it grows, and it doesn't give a damn about us. That's what I believe."

Rankin had a far away look in his eye.

"And if you are right, and it is indeed a form of intelligent life," he said. "Think what we might learn from it. We could unlock the secrets of the Universe itself."

I laughed, and I'm afraid I might have allowed some sarcasm to show through.

"As I said already. . . I don't think it gives a damn."

Rankin got no chance to answer.

Shots rang out across the installation, followed quickly by screams.

"Come on, Ballantine," Rankin said. "If you're right, you might be of some use."

I paused only long enough to lift the hip flask from the table.

We left the room at a run. Nobody tried to stop me.

*

Once again the area around the reactor block was a scene of chaos. A dozen men lay on their backs, staring at the sky. The remainder of the guard seemed unsure where to aim their weapons, and the younger ones looked almost as pale as those stricken on the ground. The Colonel's bellow could be heard at some distance as he shouted into a radio handset.

"I don't care if he's in bed with the Archbishop of bloody Canterbury. Get him up. I need a bomber, and I need it now."

Rankin strode up and reached for the handset, but the Colonel swung to one side away from his grasp.

"You can't stop me, Rankin. I have jurisdiction here. I'm leveling this place to the ground from the sky. It's the only way to be sure."

Rankin looked as if he might punch the officer, but instead he turned back to me.

"I'm going in. We need to try to reason with it. Are you with me?"

Every fibre of my being told me to run. But Rankin was adamant, and I could not in all conscience allow him to face this thing alone. I drained the contents of the hip flask in one gulp, much to the Colonel's disgust, and followed Rankin on the path towards the reactor.

"You've got ten minutes," the Colonel shouted. "Then this place will be nothing but rubble."

"Won't that just spread radiation across the countryside?" I asked.

This time it was Rankin's turn to laugh sarcastically, and echo my own words back to me.

"I don't think he gives a damn."

*

As we approached the door to the lab I heard singing waft in the air. I looked over to my right to see a crowd of townspeople gathered at the main gate. Three squaddies had stopped them entering. But they couldn't stop them from singing. The song rang around us, echoing and seeming to amplify as it bounced off the concrete wall of the reactor building.

She sleeps in the spaces to be found in between,

She sleeps, and she dreams, of the sights she has seen.

The white mist seeped out of the wall; the first time I had seen it emerge anywhere other than the laboratory. It was larger now, and much denser.

Discrete structures could be seen in its form, a slug-shaped body with long tentacle-like appendages that hung below the bulk, wafting in time with the singing, trailing almost to the ground.

She dreams of the lands she has ruled as a queen,

And the sleeping god is dreaming where she lies.

Rankin strode forward until he was close enough to the tentacles to touch them if he wished. I was more circumspect, standing further back and ready to flee at the slightest provocation.

"We mean you no harm," Rankin shouted.

I don't think it gives a damn.

The *entity* moved forward again.

Rankin shouted.

"I want to know you, to help you. Believe that." The tentacles moved closer, wafting across Rankin's shoulder, almost in a caress. "I'm not your enemy. I'm a scientist who's trying..."

The tentacles folded around him. He screamed, just once, and began to fade, becoming thin, like the creature that had him in its grasp. Outside the guardhouse the song rose to a climax.

She dreams of her lord in the space in between,

And the sleeping god is dreaming where she lies.

The creature started to drift towards me. I stepped back out of reach of the tentacles then stopped as a chill ran down my spine and it *rifled* through my mind again. This time it knew what it was looking for.

I descend through deep turquoise, feeling the cold water around me, at the same time hearing the song in my head; the song that now seems more like the forlorn call of a lost love. And, from somewhere far, far, below, the call is answered. A wash of pure joy runs through me.

My link to the entity was cut off by the rat-a-tat of automatic rifle fire. Six squaddies had come to my assistance, and although their shots did not appear to damage the entity at all, it at least paused in any attack, either physical or mental.

"Fall back," the Colonel shouted. "The bomber's on its approach."

That gave me impetus to move. I turned and fled, beating the retreating squaddies to the line of Nissen huts. I stood beside the Colonel, guessing

that he would know what was a safe distance if anyone did.

The singing rose again from outside the gate, until the noise of the approaching bomber drowned it out. It was another song; the one I had heard the first line of on my exit from the bar.

In the fire, the queen will come.

"No!" I shouted. "Call it off."

But I was far too late. The reactor building exploded in a roaring flame. The blast wave knocked off my feet and down into a deep darkness.

It felt welcoming. I let it take me.

*

I woke in hospital in Inverness two days later, and was home in Glasgow within the week. Of course the Army chaps declared the matter over. The site was secured and no further Russian infiltration would be allowed.

But I have strange sores on my body, wounds that refuse to heal. The booze helps dull the pain of course, but I cannot quash the memories, of descending into deep turquoise waters, and hearing the call. . . and its reply. Two things prey on my mind.

The first is the line from the song sang by the townspeople.

She dreams of her lord in the space in between,

And the sleeping god is dreaming where she lies.

And the second is in today's newspaper. The Yanks are testing nuclear weapons in the Pacific Ocean. The water is deep and turquoise there. And that makes me wonder.

Who is the *Lord* mentioned in the song?

And what else may be sleeping, down in those depths, waiting to be woken, in fire?

Inquisitor

From the journal of Father Fernando. 16th August 1535

The time has come. It arrived yesterday from the New World in the hold of the *Santa Angelo* and it has been brought to the castle. The Inquisitor General has tasked me with discovering the true nature of the abomination, to make a full and careful examination and ascertain what manner of *Inquisition* might be made. It is a great honour, and one which I will fulfill with all the diligence the good Lord hands to me.

There is a certain doubt in my mind, a cloud that has hung over the proceedings since I read Juan Santoro's journal last night. A dark evil is detailed in those pages, and although the Inquisitor General teaches us that all things are powerless before the truth of our Lord, I have grave misgivings about the thing I am about to see for the first time.

I have prayed for strength, but still my knees feel like water and there is a cold pit in my belly that nothing can assuage.

However my duty is clear.

It is time for the questioning to begin.

From the journal of Juan Santoro, Captain of the Santa Angelo, 3rd April 1535

If there is a hell on Earth then surely it is in this place here. No god fearing man should have to face the horrors I have led my crew through on this day. I give thanks that I have brought us all back safely to the ship, and I am much afeared with the thought of the return voyage, for the cargo is most foul and ungodly. But I would be remiss in my duty to the church if I did not report on the things that plague this new land. If the Crown wishes, as I have been told, to colonize this place, then we must know what manner of things lay claim on it at present.

In truth, I know not what we have found. The natives died bravely defending it, and for most of the day we thought that we had stumbled on a great treasure. We fought through their defenses, hacking and slashing our way through the savages to the centre of that dark temple.

As I have said, we expected treasure. What we found was beyond our ken. I have had it sealed in a lead casket, and will take it back to Seville.

But the journey will be long, for already it whispers in my mind, and I fear my dreams will be dark indeed during the long months at sea ahead.

From the journal of Father Fernando. 16th August 1535

"Already it whispers in my mind."

I had given no thought to that phrase, believing it to be the product of a sailor's superstition. But now, having seen my new opponent, I know better.

When we opened the casket that had been brought to the chamber where the questioning was to take place, I orginally bethought that we had been played false and that trickery was at work. At first glance the lead box seemed empty, its bottom a dark shadow. But as Brother Ferrer leaned over it, something *surged* within, and he was forced to step back, so suddenly that he knocked over a brazier and sent coals skittering on the flagstones. The blackness that rose from the casket, a thick liquid which had the consistency of pitch, seemed to rear back at that, giving me time to slam the lid closed on the obscenity.

And that is when it happened.

There was a *tugging* in my mind, a probing of an intelligence. I knew immediately what it was doing, as it is my own profession also. Even as I sought to ascertain the form of my opponent, at the same time it was questioning me.

I am not the only inquisitor here.

And there was something else, something I am loath to relate here lest it is discovered and my sanity is brought into question. I only caught but a fleeting glimpse, just as the lid of the lead casket dropped back into place, but it was unmistakable. As the black thing *oozed* to the bottom of the box a single eye, pale and smooth as a duck's egg, opened... and blinked.

From the journal of Juan Santoro, Captain of the Santa Angelo, 29th May 1535

Calamity has overtaken us, as I feared it might.

The thing has plagued our dreams since the start, and the crew has been without sleep for many days. There have been mutterings of mutiny since the beginning of the month, and last night matters came to a head. Three crewmen took it upon themselves to rid us of our tormentor.

At least, they tried.

Their screams in the dark alerted me to their plight and I was first to enter the hold. It is hard to describe the fear that gripped me as I saw the carnage the thing had wrought on my men. It was obvious that they had lifted the casket, probably intending to throw it overboard. But someone had dropped

their end – that much is also obvious from the dent in the leftmost edge. I can only surmise that the jolt opened the casket – and let the beast out.

What did not need conjecture was the fate of the men after that.

The black ooze lay over the bodies like a wet blanket – one that seethed and roiled as if boiling all across the surface. Pustules burst with obscene wet *pops* and flesh melted from bone even as the men screamed and writhed in agony.

Their pain did not last long. All too soon the blackness seeped in and through them until even their very bones were liquified and, with the most hideous moist *sucking*, drank up by the beast, which was now three times larger than previously. It opened itself out, like a black crow spreading its wings, the tips touching each side of the hold walls.

All along the inside surface of the *wings* wet mouths opened, and the air echoed with a plaintive high whistling in which words might be heard if you had the imagination to listen.

Tekeli-Li. Tekeli-Li.

My every instinct told me to turn and flee. But there was nowhere to escape to except the sea itself, and that was a choice no sailor would make. Instead I stood my ground while Massa, stout coxswain that he is, brought forth some firebrands. Only then did the thing seem to cower and retreat, and only then did I remember the circles of burning oil which we had crossed on entering the black temple in the jungle.

I called for a barrel of pitch and tried to hold the beast at bay with a brand until aid might arrive. My adversary had ideas of its own. Now that it was free of the casket its powers had increased. It probed at my mind, searching for my weaknesses, taunting me with my dreams. I saw things no man should have to see as I was shown the atrocities that had been committed in this thing's name by the savages in the temple.

The grip on my mind grew stronger.

I saw vast plains of snow and ice where black things *slumped* amid tumbled ruins of long dead cities.

My head swam, and the walls of the hold melted and ran. The firebrand in my hand seemed to recede into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness.

A tide took me, a swell that lifted and transported me, faster than thought, to the green twilight of ocean depths far distant.

I realised I was not alone. We floated, mere shadows now, scores – nay, tens of scores of us, in that cold silent sea. I was aware that other sailors were nearby, but I had no thought for aught but the rhythm, the dance. Far below us, cyclopean ruins shone dimly in a luminescent haze. Columns and rock faces tumbled in a non-Euclidean geometry that confused the eye and brooked no close inspection. And something deep in those ruins knew we were there.

We dreamed, of vast empty spaces, of giant clouds of gas that engulfed the stars, of blackness where there was nothing but endless dark, endless quiet. And while our slumbering god dreamed, we danced for him, there in the twilight, danced to the rhythm.

We were at peace.

A flaring pain jolted me back to sanity. I smelled burning skin, but took several seconds to note that it was my own hand that had seared. The coxswain, stout man that he is, had broken the hold on me by touching his firebrand to my skin.

I had no time to thank him, for the beast had encroached closer to me while I dreamed, and even now threatened to engulf me.

Once again I held the firebrand ahead of me, and with the aid of the coxswain I held the beast at bay, struggling to keep its grip from settling on my mind. Indeed, if the barrel of pitch had not been brought, I might have succumbed.

Burning the pitch enabled the recapture of the beast to proceed more rapidly. The heat from the flames threatened to set fire to the deck of the hold itself, but I refused to allow the men to put it out until we had driven the beast back into the casket.

I have ensured that the box is sealed completely, and it is now stored at the furthermost end of the hold. All I can do is keep the crew as far away from it as is possible on this small vessel.

That, and hope that in our dreams we do not fall again under its spell.

But it is hard. For every time I close my eyes I dream, of vast empty spaces, of giant clouds of gas that engulf the stars, of blackness where there is

nothing but endless dark, endless quiet. And while my slumbering god dreams, I dance for him, there in the twilight, dance to the rhythm.

In dreams I am at peace.

From the journal of Father Fernando. 17th August 1535

Captain Santoro's journal has at least given me a place to start. I already knew that s*trapado* would not be an option for this particular miscreant. Nor would I be able to utilise the rack or the maiden. But fire would be more than sufficient for my purposes. It took little work to prepare the cell for *Inquisition*, as matters are already set up amply for the ordeal. I ensured that the lead casket was placed inside concentric circles of oil such that they could be lit immediately in the event of an attempt to escape. I also had a brazier full of coals at hand to my right side and three needle-pokers burning white hot in a small oven to my left.

Even before I opened the casket I felt the *tickle* in my mind but I pushed it away. My God is stronger than any heathen devil. I mouthed the *Pater-Noster* as I lifted the lid.

Once again the black ooze surged, and the tickle in my mind turned to an insistent probing. Memories rose unbidden in my thoughts; of summer days in warm meadows, of lessons learned in cold monastry halls, of penance paid for sins.

I was under questioning.

That I could not allow. I am master of this inquisition. Several wet mouths opened in the black ooze. Using a pair of pliers I plucked a hot coal from the brazier and as another mouth formed I let the coal drop inside.

The grip in my mind released immediately, replaced by a formless scream which quickly became a chant that echoed around the cell. I knew the words. I had read them in the captain's journal.

Tekeli-Li. Tekeli-Li.

A long tendril reached from the lead box, coming towards me. I took a poker from the oven and with one smooth strike thrust it through the black material. The ooze retreated, shrinking back as far into the corner of the lead casket as it could get.

I leaned forward, a fresh poker in my hand.

"Are you guilty?" I asked, and stabbed down hard.

The *Inquisition* proper had begun.

From the journal of Juan Santoro, Captain of the Santa Angelo, 17th July 1535

Will this nightmare never end?

The beast, despite its incarceration, has steadily increased its hold on us since we forced it back into the casket. We cannot allow ourselves to sleep, for when we do we are trapped in its spell, lost in the dream somewhere above the cyclopean ruins.

In truth, the dream is seductive, even more so than drinking endless flagons of wine or constant inhalation of the weed that the natives smoke in the New World. Three of the crew have succumbed, falling into a deep slumber from which they cannot be awakened. They breathe, and their eyes are open, but I cannot get them to eat, and they are already close to starving. I fear they will be long lost afore we reach port.

Some days I almost feel like joining them. I am kept awake by a suffusion made from a roasted bean, a drink we discovered among the native tribes where we landed in the New World.

Would that were all we discovered.

Some of the crew have reported that the beast is also reaching into their minds during waking hours. Many of them have had the same compulsion – to go down into the hold and open the casket, releasing the thing to roam the decks. No one has yet given in to the demands, but it is another reason to make for port with all speed.

I know not how much longer we can hold.

From the journal of Father Fernando. 25th August 1535

It has taken more than a week, and sorely tested the Inquisitor General's patience, but finally, after I have burned away more than nine-tenths of its matter, it has weakened. I have found that the mind-grip works both ways. If I concentrate hard I can catch glimpses of what the beast is thinking, and feel its fear.

I have put it to the *inquisition*, and it has answered me.

As shocking as it seems, the beast has no conception of our Lord. Indeed, it seems never to have encountered a single Christian, despite the fact that it is possibly the oldest living thing on the face of the earth. That revelation came as something of a shock to me. The creature has memories going back

to a time when ice covered the face of the earth. Its first encounter with man shows a savage race clothed in furs with only rudimentary speech and I am at a loss to know how such a thing can be reconciled from what I know from my study of the biblical texts. I must seek guidance from the Inquisitor General, for my thoughts are troubled and dark.

This beast I have under my ministrations is devious and subtle. It works constantly at me, testing my belief with scenes of lust and debauchery; maidens in states of undress displaying themselves wantonly for my pleasure, hot blood flowing to feed my growth. I have to see these things, and endure, for in the seeing I also learn more about the beast's drives and passions, which are mightily strong.

I had almost come to believe that this might be the most ancient of evils, the great deceiver himself. But the thing has memories even older than the time of ice, memories of a time when it was but a servant of something vast and strange... memories of a *creator* that I do not recognise as being anything resembling my Lord. I am at a loss to know what to think of this new information and must question the beast further.

I have learned one other thing. The *creators* gave it a name, a moniker by which it recognises itself. It is known as *Shoggoth*.

From the journal of Juan Santoro, Captain of the Santa Angelo, 14th August 1535

We will make port on the morrow. It matters little, for the dream is with us now in every waking hour, and no distance from the beast will make any difference. It has passed on to us so completely that we will never be free from it. Nor would we wish anything other. Indeed, I am not the only one who has found himself standing over the lead casket just to be closer to the blessed drifting peace it offers.

There is no pain in the dream, no fear, no hunger, just the sweet forever of the dead god beneath.

I have talked to the crew. We will do our duty and take our captive to the castle. But we will no longer work for the Church after this task is done. I intend to set sail again as soon as night falls. There is a spot in the South Seas where a dead god lies dreaming.

We will find him, and join him there.

From the journal of Father Fernando. 25th August 1535

I wish now that I had read Santoro's journal a mere hour sooner, for them I might have been able to prevent the *Santa Angelo* slipping out of port under cover of night, and I might have been able to question the crew as to the nature of the malady that so sore afflicted them.

For I too have been dreaming.

I am not alone. We float, mere shadows, scores... nay, tens of scores of us, in a cold silent sea. I am aware that others are near to me, but I have no thought for aught but the rhythm, the dance. Far below me, cyclopean ruins shine dimly in a luminescent haze. Columns and rock faces tumble in a non-Euclidean geometry that confuses the eye and brooks no close inspection.

And something deep in those ruins knows I am there.

But it is of no matter. The beast is now in my thrall, and its secrets shall be mine before the day is out. They will have to be, for I fear I have been lax in my *inquisitions.* Even as I have been burning my will into the beast's flesh, so it has been leaving its mark on me. This morning at my ablutions I discovered a fleck of blackness betwixt thumb and finger that no amount of scraping will shift. It has now covered most of my left hand, forcing me to wear a glove lest it is discovered. For if the Inquisitor General were to find out I am *tainted*, my questioning would be brought to an abrupt end, and that I cannot allow.

The beast *will* reveal its secrets.

I will begin again as soon as the irons are hot.

By order of the Inquisitor General, 28th August 1535

It is our command that on this day of our Lord the twenty and eighth of August that such parts of Father Juan Fernando that can be safely transported shall be taken to the place of the ***a****uto-de-fe* and burned at the stake alongside the blasphemy which has afflicted him with its heresy.

It is further commanded that if the *Santa Angelo* is found in Spanish waters it should be set aflame and sunk with all hands and that no man is to touch any part of it under pain of himself being subjected to ordeal by fire.

Any persons found spreading the sedition of the *Dreaming God* shall be subjected to the full force of the *Inquisition*.

Let this be the end of the matter.

The Lord wills it.

The Tenants of Ladywell Manor

It is a truth most evident that a naval officer found taking the waters in Bath on a Saturday before noon must be in need of a wife.

Indeed, on the day I first met Captain Wentworth, he seemed somewhat distracted. Mother, Lucy and I had mistimed the journey, and arrived before the milliner's in Duke Street was due to open. That being the case, we decided to partake of the waters.

Lucy was distraught, for she had been so eager to try on every bonnet in the establishment, and was beside herself with worry that all the new hats would be sold before we returned to the store.

"Well, if we must take the wretched walk, at least let us do it at pace," she said, and strode off ahead of us in high dudgeon.

And thus it was that she had the misfortune to be first of us to reach the baths.

When Mother and I caught up with her, she was sucking her thumb, and was close to tears.

"The flowers were so pretty," she said.

Above her head someone had hung a tightly woven ball of hawthorn, a mane of white flowers draped like a powdered wig over the rough twigs. A single drop of red hung from a thorn, showing where Lucy had pricked herself.

"Let me see," I said, trying to prise her thumb away from her mouth.

But Lucy was more concerned about her dress. Three drops of blood lay near her waist, and she wailed when she saw them.

"I can never wear it again. I must have a new one."

Mother merely sighed, and I well knew the reason. We did not have enough wardrobe space in our whole house to satisfy Lucy's capacity for clothing.

I wrapped Lucy's finger in one of my handkerchiefs and, with a promise of a visit to not one, but two dressmakers, we continued our perambulation.

Something made me look back at the head of flowers, and a chill struck me that I could not shake off. There were two deep cavities in the ball of twigs, sunk-in shadows that tracked us like a pair of dark eyes as we walked into the old Roman baths.

After my initial misgivings, we had a most pleasant tour, and, despite Lucy's loud and frequent protestations, both Mother and I found it very educational.

We had seen no one all morning, and were walking alone alongside the largest of the bathing areas, trying to avoid the more noxious of the odours, when we were nearly knocked off our feet by a rushing gentleman. Indeed, Mother came so close to tumbling headlong into the waters that for a full minute afterwards she was all aflutter and was barely able to speak.

The gentleman, clearly a navy man from his apparel, suddenly became most solicitous, and prayed that he had done us no harm. There was something of the night about him, something dark and brooding. And although it did make my heart beat faster, one might have unkindly said there was more than a trace of fear in his eyes.

"I am most sorry, ladies," he said, helping Mother upright. "I fear I have become clumsy in my rush to be about my business."

Mother was about to give him a verbal onslaught, but it was only as she was girding herself for the argument that she saw the uniform.

She regained her composure with all the alacrity of a Mother with two unwed daughters faced with a prospective beau.

"There has been no harm done Captain. . . ?"

Not only did Mother have an unerring ability to rank an officer on a cursory glance at his uniform, she had a way of cocking her head, almost coquettishly, which brooked no naysaying. I almost laughed at the Captain's obvious discomfort.

"Captain Wentworth, at your service." he said, sweeping off his hat.

"Newly of Ladywell Manor?" Mother finished for him. "What a provident meeting, for I was just saying to Mr. Wilkinson this same morning that we should be calling on you to make your acquaintance. I have two daughters you know; Anne, my eldest, and Lucy, both of whom you see here with me. Tell me; is the house to your liking? I hear that it is a dwelling of some magnificence, but well past its former glory? They say that Cromwell himself made a visit, but surely that is just local legend?"

And now the Captain had made his final tactical error. By allowing Mother a beginning, he was caught, deep in her web. She would go on for minutes now, answering her own questions, and the Captain would not escape until he had invited both Lucy and I to call on him at his leisure.

I turned to Lucy, hoping to catch her with a conspiratorial wink, but my sister was looking away, across the bath, to where a second naval officer was walking swiftly towards us. He was younger than the Captain, and less grave, more dashing, but there was a weakness around his mouth that spoke to me of a man of many vices, and I disliked him immediately. Lucy however had no such qualms. She gasped, a sharp intake of breath that only I could hear, and I knew immediately that she was smitten.

"Lieutenant Barclay at your service ladies," he said, with a grin that would melt a snowman. "I'm sorry to tear you away sir," he said to the Captain, "But that business of ours has become urgent."

Captain Wentworth turned slowly, and once more I saw his eyes tighten, and the fear take him.

"It is not yet done?"

"Not by a long chalk sir," the lieutenant replied.

They took their leave and departed, suddenly, heading for the deep shadows of the lower baths, leaving Mother, for the first time in living memory, speechless.

~-o0O0o-~

In truth I do believe I could have forgotten about Captain Wentworth if Lucy had managed to stop her girlish gushing over "the dashing Lieutenant Barclay" and his "impish smile." But I was forced to endure her prattle all the way to the Milliners, and thenceforth throughout the carriage journey home.

Not that Mother proved any better. No sooner had we arrived home than she was regaling Pater with the tale of the navy Captain and her near escape from drowning.

Pater bore it with his usual good grace, then, with his usual incision, asked the question we should have asked ourselves.

"And, pray tell me, what was the business that brought these fine gentlemen to the Baths so early in the morning? And what was so urgent as to so quickly drag them away from my fine and obviously unattached daughters?"

Mother's flow of verbiage was barely stilled.

"I'm sure it is of no import. And I'm equally certain that we will be hearing more, especially from that charming young lieutenant... he fair took a fancy to our Lucy."

Pater harrumphed; a sound that only he could muster.

"I'm sure they were all correct and proper. But the baths are no place for gentle folk... not with doxies being slain so close by."

Mother's mouth flapped open, shut, open again.

Pater looked like he might continue, but one of Mother's looks soon put a stop to that.

"Not in front of the girls," she hissed, and ushered us from the room.

Lucy tried to listen at the door, but they had lowered their voices, too low to hear.

Besides, Lucy was excited enough to burst, and listening at doors fell a far-off second best to talking of the "delightful Lieutenant Barclay."

I repaired to my room with a headache, but was soon forced back downstairs by curiosity after hearing a knock on the door.

Sister Lucy was at the foot of the stairs, twirling as if held in a dance, squealing with delight. She held a letter in her left hand, and every few seconds she glanced at it, as if to make sure it was real and she was not dreaming.

"Oh Anne," she said, seeing me descend. "Come and see. We have been invited to Ladywell Manor... and look..."

She waved the letter at me.

"My name is in front of yours... and it is signed by my Lieutenant Barclay."

She made three more twirls around the floor, then suddenly stopped. She began to wail, as if in pain.

"But I have *nothing* at all to wear."

~-o0O0o-~

The carriage deposited us promptly at seven thirty in the drive outside the imposing edifice of Ladywell Manor.

I would have stopped to consider the exterior qualities of such a fine house, but Lucy was already skipping away into the house, drawn on by the sound of a harpsichord from inside.

She was so eager in her haste that she failed to notice the twin balls of flowering hawthorn, one on either side of the door. The chill I had previously felt at the Baths returned, as if I had just been plunged into a cold dark sea, and it was with a heavy heart that I followed my sister into the Manor.

~-o0O0o-~

The foreboding stayed with me all the way along the grand corridor, but the sound of the harpsichord grew louder, and the chatter of conversation rose alongside it. By the time I arrived in the Manor's great hall, I found myself once more anticipating the evening ahead.

My first thought on entering the hall was that the officers had invited all the young ladies of Bath. But on closer inspection, it was to be found that the ladies present all shared the common happenstance that they were all yet unattached... in fact there had never been even the slightest rumour that any of them had even been close to an attachment, and I included myself in that number.

It seems that Lucy and I were tardy in arriving, for most of the group were already deep in conversation, all save Captain Wentworth, who stood, somewhat forlorn, by the fireplace. Ensuring that Lucy was occupied. . . which indeed she was, having placed herself firmly at the shoulder of Lieutenant Barclay. . . I made my way towards the fireplace.

Just as I approached, the harpsichord player, a young officer, stopped and made his way back towards a group by the card table. And as I was about to speak, Captain Wentworth left the side of the fire and made towards the instrument.

The hubbub in the room stopped suddenly, and all the naval officers' eyes turned towards the Captain. Several of the ladies present made as if to protest, but they were hushed and whispered into silence until it was so quiet that we all heard the creak of the stool as the Captain lowered his weight onto it.

Lieutenant Barclay was first to move, leading Lucy into the middle of the floor. The rest of the officers soon followed, each taking a lady until they were formed up in a double rank in the centre of the room, leaving only myself and Captain Wentworth in want of a partner.

In other circumstances I might have been moved to protest at this slight, but my eyes were drawn to the Captain, sitting at the harpsichord, so still, so quiet, staring into the distance with sunken, haunted eyes. My heart lurched to see him so pained, and I started to move towards him.

Then he started to play, and all other thoughts were driven from my mind.

~-o0O0o-~

He started slowly; as did the dancing pairs. At first it was a tune I thought I almost recognized, a farandole with Mediterranean influences. But it soon diverged from anything with which I was remotely familiar.

Faster and faster his fingers danced on the keyboard, swifter and swifter went the dance. Louder and louder did the music crash in the room, my heart bounding in my chest.

The dance had become something heathen and frantic; the dancers faces flushed, their eyes staring sightlessly ahead as they spun across the floor in ever more intricate patterns.

And still the Captain played.

His touch on the keyboard grew less refined. As he shifted into a minor key the dancers stamped their feet in time, and from below our feet, from nether depths, came an accompanying guttural chant, as of many voices raised in unison.

Lucy was spun past nearby, and I called out to her, but she was lost to me, caught in a trance where all that existed was the dance.

I too felt the desire grow in me, the promise of wild abandon, free from all constraints of fashion and polite discourse. Indeed, I may have succumbed, but, just at the point when the dance reached its most frantic, I happened to

glance at Captain Wentworth, and all other thoughts left my head at the sight of the despair etched on his features.

Once more Lucy spun past me. I could see that her colour was high and flushed, and, as they danced, Lieutenant Barclay was grasping at her in a most unseemly manner.

The Captain continued to pound the keyboard, the muscles at his neck taut and stretched as if they might at any moment snap. He stared at something beyond the dancers, at the far side of the hall.

When I turned to look, I saw a heavy oak door swing open, showing only blackness beyond.

~-o0O0o-~

The subterranean chanting grew louder, almost overcoming the noise of the harpsichord, and somewhere deeper still, a crazed flautist blew trills and arpeggios in counterpoint. Beyond the door something moved, a greater darkness deep in the shadow, and once more I felt the cold chill of the sea.

I know not where the strength came from, but I walked over to where Captain Wentworth sat, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

He turned his head, slowly, looked up at me, and it was as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes.

He stopped playing, and a deadly hush fell suddenly over the room like a shroud. The dance faltered, stopped. All across the room ladies, flustered now, disentangled themselves from over-eager partners. One by one, still flushed but trying to regain decorum, they hurried from the hall, until Lucy and I were left alone with the officers.

The Captain seemed unable to take his eyes from my face.

"Wentworth!" Lieutenant Barclay called out loudly. "What do you think you areyou're doing?"

The Captain reached up, and, smiling, gently stroked my cheek.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Leave now. Quickly. I will get word to you if I can."

At the far end of the room the oak door swung wider open, and once more I heard the crazed flautist.

The Captain's eyes started to lose their focus.

"Go," he pleaded. "Go now!"

I took Lucy by the hand and together we fled out into the night.

As we left the Manor the eyes in the hawthorn gazed at us, greedily.

~-o0O0o-~

The next morning I tried to enter a discourse with Lucy about the events in Ladywell Manor, but she refused to brook any such discussion. Indeed, her head was so full of the delights of the "charming Lieutenant Barclay" that I believed her to be still under the spell of the dance.

I turned instead to Mother, but after explaining to her the strange occurrences at the hall, she passed them off as youthful exuberance, and chided me for not entering into the spirit of the evening. Indeed, she even intimated that I was destined to remain a spinster if I retained my singular attitude, and that I should do more to comport myself in the same manner as did Lucy if I ever wanted to become attached to a large house and five thousand pounds a year.

Pater proved no better at allaying my troubles. He barely moved from behind his newspaper as I regaled him with my tale, and when I was done, he harrumphed and mumbled words to the effect that I should have known better than to trust a sailor.

Once more I repaired to my room with a headache.

~-o0O0o-~

And once more my attempts at solitude were to be disturbed by a squeal of excitement from my sister.

On descending, I found her clutching a letter.

"I am invited to the manor once more, tra-la-la-la-la," she sang. "My lieutenant is smitten with me and cannot bear to be without my company."

"And what about Anne?" Mother enquired from the parlour doorway. "Is she also to be included?"

"No... It is for me alone," she said, and waved the letter towards me. "Besides, there will be dancing."

She twirled away towards the drawing room, singing to herself.

Mother gave me her I-told-you-so look, and retired back to the parlour.

I was about to take myself back upstairs when there was a knock at the front door.

I opened it to find Mr. Jacks the peddler standing on the doorstep, cap in hand.

"Begging your pardon miss," he said in his thick country brogue. "Would you be Miss Anne? Only, he said it had to be delivered to your hand."

"Who said?" I asked, though in truth, in my heart, I knew the answer and was not surprised when it came.

"The naval man, ma'am," he said. "He gave me this."

He held out two sheets of paper, written in a fine stylish hand, but would not let me take them.

"The Cap'n said there be a farthing in it for me... if you get my meaning ma'am. Given that it is all being done in secret like?"

He tapped the side of his nose and chuckled, a liquid, rumbling thing that spoke of something ruined in his chest.

I gave him a penny for his trouble, and counted it to be cheap for, when I closed the door on the departing peddler and scanned the first line, it near left me breathless.

"My dear Miss Anne," it read. "You have awakened in me something I thought long since dead."

I would read no more standing there in the hallway. For a third time I retired to my room.

I could scarcely contain my excitement, but that soon turned to dread as I scanned the pages before me.

~-o0O0o-~

"My dear Miss Anne.

"You have awakened in me something I thought long since dead.

"Until I laid eyes on you after the abomination in the Baths, the part of me that is Captain Wentworth had been asleep for nigh on a year, and to explain my actions to you, both in the Baths and at that accursed dance last night I must ask your forbearance in the telling of my tale.

"I was not always as you have so recently seen me. A year ago... it seems like an age to me... I was a newly appointed Captain of the King's Navy, proudly taking the HMS Valiant from Valetta to join the fleet in the Bosphorus.

"Alas, we were fated never to reach safe port, and she was struck against rocks in a storm. Seventy five good men were lost to the sea; and soon after, the rest of us came to wish we had shared their fate.

"The island on which we found ourselves was little more than bare, sun-blasted rock and thorny scrub, and for near half a day we could do little more than nurse our bruises and mourn our dead. But the prospect of a cold night to come led us to take the only shelter we could find, a deep cave, protected by a tangle of sharp thorns. Every man of us suffered a myriad of cuts as we forced our way into the shelter... And in doing so, every man of us sealed our fate, and we became the dreamers of the sleeping god.

"That first night we did not of course realize it. We slept beside a black pool of stagnant water in the depths of the cavern, and we dreamed... of vast empty spaces between the stars, of bible- black seas that lay, still and silent over a cyclopean ruin in which we slept, waiting, waiting for the stars to be right.

"But a morning came, and we forgot our dreams... Until the next night, and the night after... until the dream was what was real.

"After forty nights those who have been waiting came to us, the blind ones from the deep places.

"They taught us the old rhythms, and they showed us how to dance, and how to use the thorn to call others to join us.

"When we were ready, we, the brothers of the thorn, were sent out to find the brethren of the deep ones, the ones who kept the old wells; temples to their god beneath the sea. We would find them, and dance for them, and bring them up out of the deep places, for the stars are turning, and the rising of Great C'thulhu is nigh..."

~-o0O0o-~

I had to stop reading, for the words had raised a black fear in me, a realization that if I read on, my closeted existence would forever change. But when I remembered the first sentence my Captain had written, my heart lightened once more, and the strength grew in me to continue.

~-o0O0o-~

"Since that day, I have dreamt the dream of the sleeping god.

"We have raised the Deep Ones across Europe; I remember the catacombs of Medina, and a cold crypt deep under the holy city in Rome; but there are

many others that are little more than a memory, of rough music, of dancing, and of the ones turned mad as C'thulhu wakes in their dreams.

"And so, finally, to home, and the lady's wells.

"We brought the deep ones up through the pool under the bath. A doxy, trapped by the thorn, was with us, but the dream was too large for her to hold and, before our very eyes, C'thulhu started to awaken in her.

"She shrieked abominably as the god tore through her flesh, great pustules forming and bursting in a spray of snake-like tentacles that snapped and cracked in the air like whips.

"And something within me chose that moment to awake; I now believe it was because you, Miss Anne, were nearby. I burst from the black crypt, into sunlight and the sweet vision of your face.

"And ever since then a new dream has been growing, blotting out the nightmare, a dream in which your smiling face draws me once more into the sunlight.

"But in my heart, I know it can never be, for, as you are of the light, so I am of the dark, and of the thorn.

"Therefore I shall do the only thing that is left for me, and deliver you a warning... Come no more to Ladywell Manor.

"I must take your leave and dispatch this, for even now I feel the pull of the deep black places. I hear the flautist, and I will dance for him.

"Come no more to Ladywell Manor. There are pale things in the depths there that eyes so full of sunlight should never see.

"And beware the hawthorn, for, merely let it draw your blood and you will be lost to the dreaming god, as I am, lost in the blackness.

"Lost to the dance."

~-o0O0o-~

I confess, I read through the whole letter twice before its import struck me.

"Lucy!" I'm afraid I shouted. "Lucy!" I called again, but there was no answer.

Mother was standing, wide eyed, at the foot of the stairs as I bounded down them, two at a time.

"Anne! You are not five years old anymore. Decorum my dear. . . Decorum and comportment. . . "

I did not allow her to finish.

"Lucy. Where is Lucy!"

My rudeness had left her, once more, speechless.

"Do not speak to your mother in that tone. . . "

"Mother," I said, more softly. "There is no time for decorum. Lucy is in danger."

"Nonsense. She left in a carriage with that charming Lieutenant Barclay not five minutes ago."

I pushed past Mother, heading for the door.

"Wait," she called after me. "It is raining, and you do not have your overcoat."

But I could not stop, for I had two images in mind that threatened to freeze my blood; one, of Lucy sucking her thumb at the Bath, and the second, Captain Wentworth's final words. . .

Merely let it draw your blood and you will be lost to the dreaming god, as I am, lost in the blackness.

Lost to the dance.

I ran out into the night.

~-o0O0o-~

I ran, until my breath came hot and dry in my throat and my lungs felt like they might burst. Mud had long since coated the bottom foot of my dress and encased my feet in lumps of cold unyielding clay, and the rain had plastered my hair flat against my skull.

"I'm afraid I may need more lessons in decorum and comportment, Mama," I whispered as a carriage passed, its astonished occupants gaping at me as if I was some circus creature presented for their entertainment.

I cared not. I only had one goal in mind; to reach Lucy. . . to reach Lucy and save her, before the dreaming god took her in a dance.

~-o0O0o-~

By the time I reached Ladywell Manor I fear I was in a worse state to be accepted into polite society than even Mr Jacks the peddler. My dress was torn and splattered with mud nearly up to my waist, and I was as wet as if I had already taken a dip, fully clothed, in one of the famed baths.

It mattered naught though. There was no one present to receive me.

Only the shadowed eyes in the hawthorn heads watched me as I sped into the house, trailing mud across the fine-tiled floor.

~-o0O0o-~

I had thought I might once more hear the frenzied dance of the harpsichord, but the house was silent, and the main hall was quite empty. All was still, save for the crackling of flame on log in the fireplace, and the slow waft of the drapes in the cold breeze that blew from the shadows beyond the open oak door.

I stood there for long moments, unsure of my next actions. Just at the very moment when I might have misthought my intentions, there came the high piping of a flute, rising up from beyond the dark doorway. I allowed myself one last, lingering burst of warmth from the fire, then followed the ever-rising music, down into the darkness.

~-o0O0o-~

The walls here were old, older still than the great house built around them. My fingertips brushed rough-hewn sandstone, damp and greasy with dark green slime; slime that covered ancient carvings long since worn with age.

From beneath, the flute had been joined by a sing-song chant, soft at first, but growing ever louder until the very walls reverberated in rhythm, and I felt the beat of the wild dance call to my heart.

And still I descended, to a place where the chill reached deep to my bones and I tasted the tang of the sea in my throat.

The passageway finally levelled out, and I looked out into a rough-hewn chamber and a sight I hope never to see the like of again.

~-o0O0o-~

The room was dimly lit by oil lamps spaced in niches around the wall. In truth, it was near dark, but there was more than enough light to see the damned revellers at this bacchanalia.

They danced in frenzy around a dark well, chanting in time with the flautist's wild playing that rose up from the deep places below.

I saw Lucy, whirled past me, first by Lieutenant Barclay, then by Captain Wentworth, her eyes staring, her mouth indecorously wide as she took her share of in the demented chanting.

And deep in the well, their chant was answered, as voices, guttural and strange, rose to join the cacophony.

The dance grew ever more frenzied; the chanting ever louder, until I felt my very heart would pound itself free from the bounds of my chest.

The dance drew me, in small steps, slowly towards its whirling heart, but I was brought short as the first pale hand rose up from the depths of the well and grabbed at the rim.

~-o0O0o-~

Soon it was joined by more. They pulled themselves up out of the darkness. Pale grey, almost translucent, they were gross parodies of the human form, distended and distorted by aeons in the dark depths. Their eyes, preternaturally large, shone in the dim light, and I do believe they smiled as their eyes settled on their prize; still dancing and whirling in the throng; my own precious Lucy.

Even as the first of them pulled itself fully from the well and made towards her I was moving; not to Lucy's aid, but to the one thing in that hellish chamber that I knew might have the strength to help me.

I ran to Captain Wentworth's side and touched his arm.

~-o0O0o-~

The impact on him was instant; the dull stare left his eyes and with one glance he took in the situation.

"Stay here," he said in the tone of a man used to command.

He took two of the oil lamps from their niches, and strode into the cavorting throng.

He reached Lucy at exactly the same moment as the first of the creatures.

He did not hesitate. He slammed one of the oil lamps into the chest of the encroaching beast. It fell away, burning like a piece of paper held over a candle, dropping soundlessly into the blackness of the well where it was swallowed by the dark.

The dance stopped abruptly, the participants momentarily confused.

The Captain swung his free fist, hard, into Lucy's jaw, rendering her immediately senseless.

In almost the same movement he had thrown her across his shoulder and turned, heading back towards where I stood.

He handed me the oil lamp.

"You saw how they burn?"

I nodded.

"Then come," he said. "We have scant moments left before they recover."

With him leading, we made our way to the staircase. Even as I put my foot on the first step, I heard Lieutenant Barclay call out from behind us.

"Wentworth. You cannot take her. She is of the dance."

The Captain did not slow. He headed up the stairs, and I followed quickly behind, always keeping one eye on the shadowy depths.

Below us, soft feed padded on rock, but I could see nothing but blackness beyond the range of the lamp in my hand.

~-o0O0o-~

That long journey up the dark stairs seemed to take forever, but finally Captain Wentworth led us into the light of the hall and the heat of the fire.

As if perturbed by the sudden change from light into dark, Lucy moaned.

I turned, concerned, and when I turned back, Lieutenant Barclay stood in the doorway.

He reached for me, grin widening. With no thought or hesitation I smashed the burning oil lamp against his chest.

He did not so much burn as explode, a nest of wriggling tentacles bursting from melting flesh to thrash and writhe in time with inhuman screams and curses.

An oily smoke rose to the ceiling, and small flames grew along the jamb of the oak door.

Behind the burning body, saucer like eyes stared unblinking in the shadows.

~-o0O0o-~

Captain Wentworth once more showed his quality. He stood Lucy beside me and threw his weight behind the oak door, slamming it closed. Several snake-like tentacles were left on our side, writhing still, and the howling screams could still be heard through the heavy oak.

We piled everything we could find against the door; tapestries, drapes, even the harpsichord, although it pained me to see such a fine instrument ruined.

With a torch-brand made from a log from the fire, the Captain set it all alight.

The screams from beyond the door grew ever more frenzied, and something heavy threw its weight against the oak.

But the door held, and we had to stand back as the fire grew fiercer, starting to take hold of the wainscoting.

Lucy grabbed at my hand. When she spoke it was in the same trembling voice I remembered from after her childhood nightmares.

"Anne? What am I doing here?"

I shushed her and led her back from the ever-growing flames.

Captain Wentworth took my free hand.

"Ladies. We should take our leave in search of better circumstances."

Together, we fled from the hall as the fire took hold in the ceiling.

~-o0O0o-~

By the time we reached the main entrance, the whole manor was aflame. As we passed through, the Captain, a look of grim satisfaction on his face, lit the hawthorn balls from the dying flame of his brand.

We stood back and watched his home burn.

~-o0O0o-~

There is little left to tell. Lucy has retired to Lyme Regis, where the good clean air and the company of fine gentlemen have quite revived her.

But Captain Wentworth still suffers. Sometimes his head cocks to one side, as if listening, and his eyes take on a far-off stare.

At those times, there is only one thing that eases his despair, and I could not in all conscience deprive him of this respite.

Reader, I married him.

The Larkhill Barrow

Carnacki's card of invitation arrived just as I was starting to wonder what he was up to *this* time. On Friday evening I arrived at seven prompt at his lodgings in Chelsea at 427, Cheyne Walk.

Carnacki motioned me through to the parlor where I found the three others already there awaiting me. It was not long before Carnacki, Arkright, Jessop, Taylor and I were all seated at Carnacki's dining table. As usual talk was confined to inconsequential gossip until we repaired to the parlor for after-dinner drinks. By the time we got our glasses filled and our smokes lit we were all on tenterhooks, eager for the tale of Carnacki's latest escapades.

He did not keep us waiting, launching straight into a story that immediately had us captivated.

*

"I am sorry it has been so long since our last meeting," he began. "But I have been under a veil of secrecy that has only today been lifted. The reason for all the cloak and dagger flummery will become apparent as my tale unfolds, but let me begin by assuring you that it is as strange a story as any I have ever related, made stranger still for being performed under the auspices of His Majesty's Royal Artillery.

"It began some three weeks ago with a telegram.

"'Request your services immediately at Larkhill Barracks. George Blandford (Colonel)'

"Now you chaps know me by now. I am not the kind of man to turn down such a request, no matter how curtly it has presented itself. The next morning I was on a train to Salisbury and from there by cab to the testing ground at Larkhill.

"I was almost turned away at the perimeter by an over officious guardsman, but once I showed him the telegram I was allowed through and was escorted by an armed soldier to a tented village. There, in the largest of the tents, I was finally presented to Colonel Blandford.

"It was immediately apparent that the man was in quite a funk. Indeed, he seemed less like a military man and more like someone on the verge of diving into a bottle with no intent of surfacing. After no more than the most basic of introductions he launched into his story. As he talked, it was punctuated by munitions going off all around us, and that only served to lend verisimilitude to the yarn he spun.

"'Before I start,' he said. 'I must inform you that this must remain strictly confidential. If word of what is happening here ever gets out, it may give the enemy a distinct advantage.'

"I did not bother inquiring as to *which* enemy. There is always one.

"The Colonel continued.

"'It began last week. We were ordered to start testing on a new gun, the Hotchkiss Mark I. We had it set up on a mound out on the plain that we have used in the past as a piece of higher ground. Gunnery Sergeant Rogers was keen to see what the new weapon could do and once we had the dummies in place he set about mowing them down, thirty rounds at a time. The air was full of the din for many seconds.

"'I went to inspect the damage to the dummies, but only got half way across the field when Sergeant Rogers started to scream. Now you must understand Mr. Carnacki, Rogers is one of the stoutest men I have ever served alongside. Yet he was in such terror that he had to be restrained forcefully to prevent injury to himself.

"'A few stiffeners in the mess later and he was more his old self again, but no amount of ordering was going to get him back on that mound. He has not talked of exactly *what* brought on such terror, but that night everyone in camp got a small taste of it.

"The Colonel opened his desk drawer and removed a hip flask. He took a long smooth gulp.

"'It is the nightmares that do it Mr. Carnacki. Such dreams as no Christian man should have to suffer. Every time we fired that blasted gun on top of the mound the man on the gun suffered a blue funk. The night afterwards, the dreams returned to us all. And the drums -- the infernal drums.

"'After a while we stopped using the mound altogether. We could not get a man to go up there, even under threat of court-martial. But it was too late. The drums, and the dreams have continued for us all.'

"His voice dropped to a whisper.

"'And they are getting stronger.'

*

"Now I have seen hysteria before now," Carnacki continued. "But never among a band of military men hardened by battle and united in camaraderie. At that stage I thought they might be suffering from a common delusion, but I would not know the details of the matter until I got to the cause.

"That afternoon I went out onto the firing range with a young private who was clearly terrified even before we got close to the mound.

"'You do not have to do this,' I said to him as we left the Colonel's tent.

"He was ashen-faced and his lower lip trembled. He looked to be no more than eighteen years old and his uniform had clearly been intended for a larger man. But his gaze was clear and bright as he looked me in the eye.

"'I have my orders sir,' he replied. "And Jimmy Carruthers ain't no coward.'

"He led me out onto the range.

"Almost immediately I saw the *mound* I realized what it was. It was a long barrow, a large example of the species that are found liberally scattered all over the Plain and surrounding hills. Remarkably this one seemed to be still intact, having never been plundered by treasure seekers.

"I was soon to find that there was a good reason that this particular site had remained unspoiled.

"Even before we started to make our way up the slight incline I felt the malign influence of the place. It *thrummed*, like a dynamo underfoot, and the young private stopped, unsure as to what he was feeling.

"I put a hand on his shoulder.

"'I am here with you lad. Let us get this over with, then you and I can have a smoke and a beer in the mess.'

"He smiled at that, and it was enough to get him moving, but by Jove, we wanted to turn and flee with every step. The view from the top of the mound temporarily relieved the symptoms. We looked out from a raised elevation over a large flat plain. Some five hundred yards distant stood a row of straw dummies – our target for the test.

"The Hotchkiss gun lay under a tarpaulin and it was a matter of seconds before Carruthers was ready. He lay on his belly and set aim at the dummies. I pressed my hands over my ears, but the din when he started to fire was still deafening.

"Now you chaps know that I have faced terror many times afore now, and have been so close to death that I have felt its cold breath on my face. But those times were all as nothing compared to the sheer funk that descended on me as those shots were fired and the mound began to echo in time.

"It began with a reverberating vibration that shook the ground beneath us, as if a giant might be attempting an awakening from a buried sleep. Carruthers tried to stand but the shaking was so violent that he immediately fell back to lie on the ground beside the gun, fear huge in his eyes. The vibrations soon shook me to my very core, threatening to shake my flesh loose from my bones. I too fell on the grassy mound as darkness seeped in at the edge of my sight.

"In less time than it took to draw a breath I was blinded, groping in the darkness as the ground rose and fell around us.

"But that was not the worst of it. I was in blackness. But I was not alone.

"A drumbeat had started and I felt it just as much in the pit of my stomach as I heard it in my ears – a giant drum, distantly far, but getting closer every second, beating as fast as my terrorized heart. Something moved in the dark, something huge. I was lost in a world of fear, like a child in a dark room when he senses movement under his bed. The blackness surged, washing over me in waves. I wished I were dead so that I might be free of this. Somewhere in the dark young Carruthers screamed, but try as I might I was unable to find him. I was utterly lost, utterly alone.

"And just as I thought I could take no more, something in the blackness reached for me."

*

Carnacki paused to knock the ash from his pipe and refill it from his tobacco pouch. None of us spoke. We knew from long experience not to disturb the flow of the story at this juncture. There would be plenty of time for questions later – if any were needed.

*

"It was not *my* fortitude, but that of young Carruthers that saved us from any assault. By some means he got his hands in the weapon and fired round after round into the ground at our feet. My sight recovered sufficiently to see mud and earth fly where the shots tore into the ground. The giant drumbeat faltered. It did not stop completely, but its effects diminished sufficiently that I was able to drag the young soldier off the mound and onto safer ground.

"The further we got from the source, the more the feelings receded until we were able to drop to the ground, ourselves once more, but totally spent.

"And that is where the Colonel and the others found us, lying a hundred yards from the mound and too weak to stand, too weak even to speak. I was ignominiously carried off to a tent and a camp bed that felt better than any feather pillow.

"Sleep did not come easily. Every time I closed my eyes I saw blackness where something dark, huge and *old* lurked. I didn't know whether it was aware of me or not, but I did not wish to take any chances. My whole body seemed to sing with a deep bass note that took hours to subside and even then I still felt it when I touched my teeth with my tongue. I could lie there no longer. I got up and went in search of a smoke.

"As always, a pipe of my best shag soon had me calm and able to consider the situation with some degree of rationality. Soon I had convinced myself.

"I believed the origin of the happenings to lie in a strange but perfectly understandable cause that I have seen before, and indeed, I have previously related the story to you chaps. You may remember my tale of the Jarvee and the phenomenon known as attractive vibrations. Harzam, in his monograph on "Induced Hauntings," points out that such are invariably produced by "induced vibrations," that is, by temporary vibrations set up by some outside cause. Well I had my cause, in the rhythmic *rat-a-tat* of the gunfire. Something in the mound was *sympathetic* to the sound, and answering in kind.

"All I had to do was prove it, and for that, I was going to need both the help of the Colonel, and the use of some equipment I had at hand back in my lodgings in London.

"Before repairing back to the camp bed I told the Colonel of my plans, and had him send for my things. I retired to bed happy that I had taken some degree of control over the situation.

"That feeling lasted only as long as it took me to fall asleep. The dream came immediately.

"It started in pitch blackness. A drum beat in the distance, a deep thudding like a hammer on metal. I tried to wake myself, for somehow I knew this to be a dream, but I was locked in place, unable to move, unable even to scream as the beat grew louder and the blackness darkened. Soon the drum pounded in my ears so loud that I thought I would never hear anything else again. In the dark something shifted. . . and moved closer.

"I woke in a cold sweat.

"I immediately knew that there would be no more sleep for me that night. I took my pipe and went outside. As I lit up I could see thin tendrils of smoke drifting skywards from tents all around me. Lamps were on in many of them and I could hear murmured conversations from the bigger tents where several men were billeted together. I doubt if there was a single man in the camp yet asleep.

"In the morning the Colonel took my advice and raised camp, moving the whole operation several miles to the north. It took until well after noon, but it was immediately apparent that the moral of the troops had improved.

"As for myself, I approached the mound with some trepidation, but I was determined to prove my theory of *induced vibrations.*

"To my surprise and delight young Carruthers volunteered to accompany me. I also prevailed on the Colonel for the assistance of a draftsman. This turned out to be a serious chap from Yorkshire by the name of Brown who scarcely uttered a word but produced the most wonderful detailed drawings.

"We spent much of that first day in measuring and describing the exterior dimensions of the mound. There was no repeat of the terrors of the day before, although there *was* a constant low thrumming all across the mound, as if something was just waiting to be kicked into action once more.

"Carruthers and myself left Brown to finish his preliminary drawing and lit up some smokes. The young private was obviously already an old hand. He had rolled a needle-thin smoke and had it lit even before I got my pipe full. He held it cupped backwards in his hand to protect it from the wind and when he took a drag of smoke it was the furtiveness of a man well used to taking his pleasure under the threat of being found out.

"We were still smoking when Brown called us over. His examination of the ground had borne fruit and he stood in a slight depression. He had pulled some of the topsoil aside and pointed downward to a deeper hole that led into blackness.

"We had found the entrance.

*

Carnacki paused once more -- this time to allow us to recharge our glasses and get some fresh smokes going. While we were occupied he himself sat

and stared into the fire. I noticed for the first time that there were dark bags under his eyes, and a strain showing there that I had never previously seen.

He looked like a man who had not slept well for quite some time. Indeed, I would have prevailed on him to save the tale for another night, but he waved me aside, intent on continuing.

*

"I went down into the barrow later that afternoon armed with nothing more than a lamp. At first the interior looked as I would have expected. The walls were built of large blocks of sandstone, beautifully engineered and dovetailed together so tight that you could scarce slip a sheet of paper between them. I have visited several Neolithic tombs, in Carnac, in Orkney and on Dartmoor. This gave the same sense of age, of a time long past. What I hadn't expected, what was completely different, was the overwhelming feeling that this place was in use.

"The initial chamber was some ten feet long, and half as wide. Small passages led off on either side leading to sub-chambers, all of which were dry, but empty. Brown entered behind me and started to make measurements. Young Carruthers loitered at the entrance, too scared to enter, but driven by his duty to help me. I took pity on him and told him he could have a smoke break as I headed deeper into the mound.

"The ground descended at the far end of the chamber, leading me down an incline and into a larger room beyond.

"It was a rough-hewn chamber of some antiquity, and unlike the smaller chambers near the entrance, this one was far from empty, The walls were covered in small, tightly packed carvings. At first I thought it might be a language, but it was none that I recognised from my studies, indeed, it seemed to bear no resemblance to anything I had ever seen before. Brown was equally as puzzled when he arrived and the pair of us spent some time studying all the carvings searching for meaning. None came.

"All the time I had been in the mound I was aware that the vibrations underfoot continued apace. But as yet there was no sign of any drumming or anything that might suggest a return to the full shaking terrors of the day before.

"For that, I needed the trigger, but I was loath to implement that plan without a better understanding of the outcome. That meant there was

nothing for it but to try and decipher the carvings. Brown and I started in straight away, him taking meticulous drawings as I divided the large wall area into manageable sectors.

"Light was fading on the first day before we emerged and dragged our weary bodies across to the camp's new location. That night everyone slept soundly, with no interruptions for dark things moving to the beat of giant drums.

"Morale in the camp was much improved in the morning, and my own spirits were raised by the arrival of my things from London, including the two phonographs I had requested."

*

Carnacki had not paused, but Jessop interrupted the tale.

"Phonographs? Oh, I say. Have you got the four-minute cylinders? They say the quality is the best yet, although Gramophone quality is also improving. I believe discs are going to be the thing to have next year. But. . . "

If allowed, Jessop would go on about his equipment for hours. Luckily one look from Carnacki put paid to *that.*

Carnacki allowed us a second to settle before resuming.

*

"We spent the next three days merely cataloging the extent of the wall carvings in the chamber, and poor Brown was exhausted by the end of it. But he had provided me with a complete annotation of everything we could see. Unfortunately I could still make neither head nor tail of it. The Sigsand MS was no help, holding no descriptions of any such markings. I saw nothing for it but to proceed with the experiment and pull the trigger.

"The case took on a further degree of urgency when the men sleeping nearest the mound started to complain of a return of the dreams. It seemed the effects of the mound were still spreading.

"The next morning Carruthers helped me record the sound of the Hotchkiss Mark I onto a cylinder. Then we lugged the phonograms and a battery big enough to drive them down to the mound.

"Once again I took pity on the lad and allowed him to stay at the entrance as I went down to the chamber. We had set the two phonograms in the center of the space. I steeled myself for whatever might happen and set the first cylinder going.

"The sound of gunfire filled the chamber.

"The drumming started almost immediately. I set the second phonogram to record and left the chamber at a run. Even before I reached the entrance I could feel the darkness creep and reach for me. I threw myself out into the open just as it threatened to blind me. Carruthers half-carried me across the Plain until we reached a place where the vibrations were manageable and we stood, sharing one of his smokes. After what seemed like an age the drumming finally subsided. I crept back into the mound and retrieved the phonographs.

"I had my recording. But it had come at a cost. That same night the dreams came again, to every man in the camp."

*

"Matters did not improve in the morning. I was summonsed to the Colonel's tent to be met by an officious little man in a suit who was introduced as *Jenkins from the Ministry.*

*"*This man proved to be most interested in my research, and indeed seemed to know every detail of what had already occurred. He demanded to listen to the recording I had made the day before. I tried to appeal to the Colonel, but it seemed that the *Ministry* man outranked anyone else at the camp. Even when I explained what I considered to be the danger of sympathetic vibrations, still the man insisted. I had no choice but to comply.

"I had no idea what the outcome would be of playing the recording. The trigger, I already knew, was the rhythm of the gunfire, but I also knew from a harsh lesson learned that the very sound of the drumming would induce terror in even the strongest of hearts while in the vicinity of the mound. Whether that would be the case here in the camp, I had no way of knowing. It was with some trepidation that I switched on the phonogram.

"The sound of drumming filled the tent and I waited for a reaction.

"The syncopated rhythm might have set one's feet tapping, but the drumming proceeded to its end with no other power than that.

"I breathed a sigh of relief. The man from the *Ministry* could not conceal his disappointment. After he had left the Colonel explained the situation.

"'The *Ministry* thinks you might have discovered a new weapon. They were hoping to be able to take your cylinder and duplicate it. Just think what would be the outcome if they could take the terror, the nightmares, and

induce them in our enemies. We would strike fear into their hearts even before a shot was fired. Think of it.'

"I did indeed think of it. It filled me with almost as much fear as the blackness itself. Even as I lay abed that night I could think of little else. And when sleep did finally come, it was filled with my worst nightmare, a creeping blackness inching ever closer, reaching -- always reaching.

"I woke covered in a cold clammy sweat to find that less than ten minutes had passed. But there would be no more sleep that night.

"In the morning I set to the task of deciphering the markings, for I now believed that they held the secret to halting the nightly assault on our senses."

*

Carnacki stopped and set about refilling his pipe. I noticed that his movements were slow and deliberate, as if he needed to concentrate fully on the task. I saved him a journey and refilled his whisky glass.

In the lull, Jessop tried to apologize for his earlier gaffe, but Carnacki waved him away with a tired smile.

"I will be happy to hear your views on the latest recording techniques," he said. "For they will be most useful in future investigations. But for now, let me finish this tale, for I find myself growing tired, and I would like to end tonight if I can."

We all recharged our glasses for the last time and lit up our smokes to add to the growing fug in the parlor.

*

"For three more days Brown and I knocked our heads against the enigma that was the markings. I must have pored over his drawings a hundred times, and listened to the wax cylinder as many times again.

"The nights were the worst, filled with the screams of those who were able to sleep, and the constant grumbling of those who struggled to stay awake. I smoked twice as much as usual and each morning arose with a mouth tasting of ash and a pounding headache.

"On the fourth morning news started to filter in of disturbances in the night in surrounding towns. The effect was spreading.

"Orders came down from on high that the situation had to be dealt with immediately, but neither the Colonel or I had any idea how to comply with such a request. It was when the Colonel informed me that he intended to pack the mound with explosives and *send it to hell where it belongs* that I decided drastic action of a different kind was required.

"Carruthers came with me down to the mound, the pair of us lugging the phonographs and battery between us. This time the young man insisted on standing with me in the chamber as I switched on both recordings simultaneously. The sound of gunfire echoed and joined with the drumming. The chamber rang and echoed, a cacophonous din assaulting our ears. The shaking also came almost immediately, first through the soles of my feet then up my spine until my very skull rattled and hummed. My sight started to go soon after than, blackness creeping until I was once more totally blind.

"Every part of me screamed that I should run, but I stood my ground. I felt young Carruther's cold hand in my palm. The drumming thudded through me, sending my stomach seething and roiling. The blackness thickened and again I felt *something* move.

"Still I stood my ground. The noise was almost unbearable.

"The *thing* kept moving in the darkness. It reached for me.

"And then it happened. The drumming in the room reached a new frenzy. Dust and rubble shook free from the ceiling.

"The blackness receded. . . slowly at first, then quicker as the drumming reached a crescendo.

"The cylinders played out. The drumbeats echoed in the chamber for a while then died away. The darkness slowly cleared. The first thing I saw was Carruther's pale white face, his eyes staring wildly.

"Still hand in hand we stumbled outside where he voided the contents of his stomach in the grass. I almost felt like joining him, but my mind was working faster than my body.

"I had learned something. The darkness was much more than just a vibration artifact – it was a malevolent entity, intent on breaking through into our world. And the drumming did not *bring* the darkness.

"It kept the darkness at bay.

"By the time my meeting with the Colonel came round in the afternoon I had the beginnings of a thesis.

"Brown provided the missing link barely an hour before the meeting. He arrived at a run to where I sat in my tent preparing my presentation for the Colonel.

"'It is not a language,' he said, brandishing his drawings in front of my face in his left hand and the cylinder of the drumming recordings in his right. 'It is a notation. Almost musical. . . but definitely rhythmic. Look.'

"He traced out a patch of his drawing with a finger, then drew my attention to an area of the cylinder. The marks on the wax corresponded almost exactly with the marks on the drawing."

*

"I took both the drawings and the cylinder with me when I met the Colonel. He was still of a mind to pack the mound with munitions and be done with it, but to his credit he heard me out

"'I now believe I was in error to ascribe the situation to sympathetic vibrations,' I began.

"That got me a raised eyebrow and a wry smile, but he was enough of a brick about it to allow me to continue.

"'There is indeed an entity residing in the barrow.'

"That got me another raised eyebrow, but I ploughed on regardless.

"'I believe the barrow to be a prison, and the low chamber to be a cage, of sorts. The entity is bound within this chamber by some kind of acoustic bonds, as delineated by the carvings on the walls. We have somehow loosened these bonds by firing the weapon atop the mound, the rhythm of the gun in some manner providing a *key* to the locks that bind the entity. It is obvious that we have given the being a way of partially escaping its cell, and it has taken the opportunity, visiting us nightly in our dreams, and testing the defenses for a way to escape completely.'

"The Colonel stopped me in full flow.

"'It may be obvious to you old man,' he said. "But it's dueced odd all around. Are you sure a bomb wouldn't be efficacious?'

"'I am sure,' I said. "To do so would release the bonds completely, and the entity would be free. I suspect we would quickly see just how effective the

hoped-for weapon would be. The whole country would be in uproar in days.'

"The colonel went white as a sheet.

"'Can't we just close up the mound and stop using the gun?'

"I shook my head.

"'The *key* has already been turned in the lock.'

"'Then what do you suggest?'

"I trusted to my instincts.

"There is a solution I have attempted with some success in the past," I said. "I have it among my things. With your permission, I would like to try destroying the entity completely."

*

Carnacki stopped and stared into the fire.

"I have been considering how much of the detail of this case I should relate," he said. "I have years of experience of dealing with such matters. But you chaps here have only experienced at second hand the awful powers of beings from the Outer Ring. . . for that is what I had on my hands down in that chamber. An entity so vast as to be almost incomprehensible, completely without interest in the acts of mere humans, yet with the capacity to destroy us all utterly should we allow it access to this plane. I do not wish to burden you, my friends, with thoughts so dark that they will invade your dreams.

"Yes, the entity was indeed from that same psychic circle as I told of in the tale of Wilton's Hog. I believe it to be a similar kind of thing, something whose existence plagued the builders of the old stones and barrows out there on the Plain. Indeed I believe in some respects that the old stones are aligned in their fashion *because* of the Outer Ring, in an ancient attempt to control and divert the powers in much the same way as I do myself with more modern technology. You get my line of suggestion?"

I am afraid none of us sat in the parlor were quite able to follow his thinking.

Carnacki sighed and sat back in his chair.

"Maybe the means I reached a conclusion will make things clearer."

*

"The next morning I started by inscribing the protective circles on the chamber floor. I began with the basic protections from the Sigsand MS.

"I began by drawing a circle of chalk, using a piece of string anchored to a center point and taking care never to smudge the line as I navigated my way around the chamber. Beyond this I rubbed a broken garlic clove in a second circle around the first.

"When this was done, I took a small jar of purified water and went round the circle again just inside the line of chalk, leaving a wet trail that dried quickly behind me. Within this inner circle I made my pentacle using the signs of the Saaamaaa Ritual, and joined each Sign most carefully to the edges of the lines I had already made.

"In the points of the pentacle I placed five dry biscuits wrapped in linen, and in the valleys five phials of the purified water. Now I had my first protective barrier and with this first stage complete the center of the chamber, now protected as it was by the most basic of spells, already felt more secure.

"I have told you enough tales by now for you not to need a description of my electric pentacle, for you know that it has saved me many times already, and proves most efficacious against many emanations and disturbances.

"I have made several improvements in recent months, and when I set the mechanism to overlay the drawn pentagram upon the floor and connected up the battery, the glare shone from the intertwining vacuum tubes. You may expect me to tell of the azure glow, but my improvements, coming as they have from long study on the ways of the Outer Circle, have led me to include other colors. The Sigsand manuscript puts it thus:-

Nor can he abide in the Deep if ye adventure against him armed with red purple. So be warned. Neither forget that in blue, which is God's color in the Heavens, ye have safety.

"My interpretation of this, I must tell you, consists of seven glass vacuum circles -- the red on the outside of the pentacle, and the remainder lying inside it, in the order of orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

"Once I was sure that the vacuum valves were all operating correctly, I stood in the center of the circles and readied the phonographs.

"Just before I started young Carruthers called from the entrance. He, stout lad, had offered to stand beside me once more, but I could not in all

conscience expose him to such danger. I had him stand in the upper chamber. The Colonel, as a precaution, had already filled the side chambers with black powder. Carruthers was in charge of the detonator, to be used in the event of my abject failure.

"I called back to the lad, indicating that all was ready, then started up the recording of the gunfire. The effect was immediate. I felt it first through the soles of my feet, but soon my whole frame shook, vibrating in time with the rhythm. My head swam, and it seemed as if the very walls of the chamber melted and ran. The pentacle receded into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing existed save the dark and the pounding beat.

Shapes moved in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that capered and whirled as the drum grew ever more frenetic. I gave myself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.

I know not how long I wandered, there in the space between. I forgot myself, forgot my duty, in blackness where only rhythm mattered. I believed I had been there for an age, but I was brought back directly to the pentacle when the cylinder on the phonograph played itself out. Only two minutes had passed.

"Thankfully I still stood in the centre of the pentacle. A giant drum beat around me, but now that the *key*, the gunfire, had been stopped, I felt no call to join in the blackness.

"Beyond the pentacle, despite the fact that the valves glowed brightly, the chamber was filled with darkness, shadows so deep that I could not see the carved walls. For the first time I could sense my adversary directly, probing at my defences, looking for a passage through. It was time to begin the *expulsion.*

"I replaced the cylinder in the phonograph with one that Brown and I had worked up. Our markings on the wax matched a passage of rhythm mentioned in the Sigsand MS as being used by certain tribesmen in removing malevolent spirits. I did not yet know whether it would work, but I had no option but to give it a try.

"I also attached my electric pentacle to the phonograph, such that the spectrum of would glow in time with any sound. I started the cylinder spinning more in hope than in expectation of success.

"The phonograph sounded thin and tinny in comparison to the deep drumming that echoed in the chamber, but when the valves started to flash in time the drums seemed to falter and the darkness thinned enough that I could momentarily see the walls of the chamber. I almost let out a cry of victory, but I was premature.

"The blackness surged. Sparks flew from all the valves, the sudden light so bright I had to squeeze my eyes shut, and even then the after image stayed there for long seconds. The defences held, for a while. But I knew I only had mere minutes before the phonograph cylinder would play itself out, leaving me only with the electric pentacle between the entity and myself. From what I had seen, I knew that if I were to wait that long I would be a goner.

"I started to chant in time with the recordings, meaningless sounds in a voice made throaty with fear. But the new sound found some sympathy in the walls of the chamber itself, as if they had been hewn for this very purpose.

"A new beat grew, a bass drum in perfect time with my chanting.

"Once more the darkness threw itself forward against my defences.

"Several of the valves started to dim, and my voice faltered. . . just for a fraction of a second. The blackness swelled and pressed an attack stronger than any previously made. The valves flickered and dimmed. I raised my voice, putting more depth into the chant, aware that there were mere seconds left to me.

"In answer the whole chamber seemed to swell in song, my own voice echoed and amplified, as if recorded and re-recorded on a thousand phonographs simultaneously. Even as the valves failed completely the blackness shrunk and diminished. A valve popped and I was forced to blink. When I looked again it was just in time to see the blackness hover over the phonograph, like a black cape falling over the contraption.

"The cylinder played out with a last dying *whirr.* The blackness fell into the drum then was gone. The echoes faded and died and my chant died with them. I stood in a sudden silence."

*

"I may have been standing there yet if the tremulous voice of young Carruthers had not inquired after my health in a loud voice that had more

than a hint of fear in it. When I emerged from the lower chamber he almost set off the detonator in his fright, and I had to prise his hand gently from the handle lest he send us both to the place the Colonel intended for the barrow.

"The Colonel himself was disinclined to believe that the situation was controlled with no evidence to prove it, but that night the whole camp slept peacefully.

"The man from the *Ministry* arrived the next day and demanded from me that I show him how to use and control the *blackness*. I told him the truth. I did not know how.

"I did not however tell him of that last second in the chamber, and how the darkness had been absorbed into the cylinder.

"And no one but me has seen hide nor hair of that piece of wax.

"Until now."

*

Carnacki reached down to the side of his chair and brought up a phonograph cylinder. He traced the grooves and scratches in the wax with his finger.

"What a marvellous thing modern technology is. This single cylinder has done the same job as a rock chamber that must have taken many years to hew from the ground.

He showed the cylinder to Jessop and smiled.

"I believe it to be safe, as long as I keep it far from the sound of the Hotchkiss Mark I. What say you Jessop? Would you like to hear what happens when you play this back on your equipment?"

Jessop went white and shook his head.

Later, after Carnacki had shown us out with his usual jaunty *out you go*, Jessop and I walked together along the embankment. He was quiet for a long time, but when he spoke, I knew exactly what he had been thinking.

"You know, I think they are right. I think the *Gramophone* is the way of the future."

The Invisible Menace

I didn't know why I was called to attend a meeting in Whitehall, but I certainly didn't expect to be hauled up in front to the Minister of Defense or to be read the riot act; but that's exactly what happened. The six of us stood in front of the Minister's desk like a group of naughty schoolboys while he laid into us for everything he perceived was wrong with our running of the operation. It seemed our research group had been remiss in our duties, or at least, that was going to be the official line if we didn't, in the Minister's own words, get our heads out of our arses.

"We can't survive another Blitz, and these new Russian rockets are ten times more lethal than the V2s ever were. We brought you in to do something about it. It's high time we saw some results, so I'm sending you all on a forced holiday until we get somewhere."

Quite what the 'something' was that we should be doing, the Minister never made clear, but we members of the Rocket Research Group who were present were left in little doubt that our careers were on the line unless we came up with a plan, and fast. We were moved out of Lincoln the very next day and sequestered in South London for the duration, or until the Minister decided he needed us for something else, or didn't need us at all.

At first we were at a complete loss as to how to proceed. We already knew that long-range radar wouldn't cut it, it was all well and good to see something coming from far away when you had anti-aircraft gun positions all along the coast, but none of our guns were going to stop a Soviet ICBM. All that long hot summer of '55 we sat in the overheated, too-cramped Nissen huts that were our temporary accommodation in Greenwich barracks, scratching our heads and throwing out ever increasingly dumb ideas for consideration. In the evenings we went down to the local bars, smoked too many cigarettes and drank too much ale, neither of which

helped us come up with any worthwhile, but it was more fun than sitting in the huts.

Young George Thornton, our most junior engineer, was the unwitting catalyst that finally broke the run of duff ideas and started us on the right path. He turned up one Monday morning full of cheer and tales of meeting a new girl. Over the course of the day we all learned much more than we needed to about a weekend that had revolved round a trip to the West End to see the latest big Yank movie to come over the pond.

"It was smashing, Professor," he said to me. I wasn't really listening, I had spent most of a frustrating morning fiddling with an electromagnet, trying to get the blasted thing to work, and I wasn't in the best of moods. "They have these alien spaceships, see, right graceful they are too, like swans, with long sweeping necks, although their heads shoot death rays with this huge noise you have to go hear in a big picture house, PweepWeepWeep , like that, trucks and tanks and people all vaporized. Then, when the Yanks try to stop them with planes and bombs, they've got this magnetic force field around them that stops everything, of course I could see it was just a glass dome trick like, but Bettie, that's her name, Bettie loved it. And then there's this bit in a farmhouse and. . . "

As I say, I had tuned him out, but two words had got through at the same time as I was looking at the big magnet.

Force field.

I didn't even know if it was possible, but maybe it didn't have to be, I wasn't just thinking about an invisible shield, I was wondering whether just the idea of an invisible defense, whispered to the right, or wrong, people, might be enough to deter an attack. But I worked on it anyway, if we were going to sell it to the Russians as a reality, we'd need to make it sound plausible, and fill the story with all the heft and weight of something that actually existed.

But even before I made a start, I ran the idea past the team, then the brass at Whitehall. To my surprise the Minister thought it to be a dashed fine idea, I found out later that he'd seen the same movie as young George, but at the time all it meant was that I suddenly had more funding and assistants than I knew what to do with.

Now that we had a goal in mind our ideas for putting it into operation were still outlandish, and some were definitely still dumb, but at least they were

now dumb with a purpose. I couldn't get the idea of the electromagnet out of my head. So we built a bigger one, then a bigger one still. We began experiments using pulsed EM to charge the atmosphere and disrupt anything coming at us from above. Initially all we succeeded in doing was blacking out radio and television transmission all across the Home Counties, the PM took a lot of flak for that one, but we were definitely getting somewhere. After a couple of months we had built a test system that successfully kept pigeons away from Trafalgar Square, that got the PM a lot of his Brownie Points back with the public, but little praise from the laundry and cleaning firms in the city.

Finally, one day in early November, we thought we had a working model that would function for at least long enough for a full strength demonstration. I won't bore you here with the technical details, the math is labyrinthine, but more that that, it is deadly dull. Suffice to say, we had a model that looked feasible, math that worked, so we built it; it wasn't anything that was going to be portable, not anything that could be wheeled out on a battlefield. It was the size of a small house, an ugly mess of coils, copper, brass, magnets, wiring and enough generators to keep most of the city going for days. It had been cobbled together fast, too fast in my opinion, but the team said it was going to work, buoyed as they were with the success of the unit that was still buzzing away next to Nelson's Column in the city center. We were ready to show off.

The MOD made a big deal of it, the Minister and the PM were present in the square in the center of the old Barracks, along with much of the country's top military brass. I realized that if the Russians were intent on an attack, we might well have just provided them with a perfect opportunity.

The Minister made a fine speech about the security of our great nation and the ingenuity of the best scientific minds in the world. I pushed the switch, just praying that the bally thing would work.

A loud, not unpleasant hum filled the air, and the sky above us shimmered, now slightly green where it should have been blue, if my calculations were right it would now have taken on that tint over the whole city. Everybody waited silently for several minutes. Nothing much of any import happened. The sky shimmered and danced like oil rising from a hot skillet, and everyone's faces had taken on a greenish reflective hue, but apart from that, there was nothing to show for all our efforts. Nothing visible anyway.

"Is that it?" the PM asked.

The Minister smiled.

"That's it, sir. London is now the only city in the world to get a protective shield at the flick of a switch."

"And how do we know that it works?"

"I think the appropriate question is, how do the Russians know that it doesn't?"

The top brass all drifted away, but many of them shared the PM's wry smile. The Minister gave us a pat on the back and the rest of the day off, so I took my team down into Greenwich in search of a bar in which we could celebrate.

*

The first sign that things were not as they seemed came that very afternoon. The early evening news was on the television in the pub, they were still talking about Princess Margaret's failed engagement, and what with that, and the locals complaining about the poor reception on the box, I wasn't paying it too much attention. But then they broke into the scheduled broadcast with a news flash, the main stand at Upton Park had collapsed, luckily after the afternoon match was done and the crowd had dispersed. The BBC dispatched a film crew, but all they got was scenes of rubble and ruin, the old stadium looked like a bomb had hit it. Of course the news was in black and white, but the reporter's talk of a 'persistent green glow, and smell of vinegar' had me thinking.

"Did we do that, do you think?" young George said beside me, he was rather the worse for wear, having taken to the ale with some gusto.

I shook my head.

"I can't see how. It's a coincidence. That's all it is, an accident."

There was another 'accident' in Lewisham that evening when a tower block collapsed, then another in Putney on Sunday morning when the old bridge went down into the river 'as if some giant foot had stood on it' according to bystanders. After witnesses to both events independently mentioned a strange green glow and smell of vinegar I was not in the slightest bit surprised to be called in to an emergency meeting in the Minister's rooms in Whitehall that same Sunday afternoon.

*

Many of the military men that I'd seen at the Barracks the previous day were seated around the long table. They weren't smiling now, and the fact that I wasn't given the option of sitting with them told me just about all I needed to know about my place in the pecking order.

The table was strewn with photographs of destruction, Upton Park, the Lewisham tower block, and a stretch of rubble-filled river that I took to be the remains of Putney Bridge. Right in the center of the table was a large map of the city, with three red flags denoting where the damage had been done.

"Did you do this?" the Minister said, almost shouting. I refrained from reminding him that only twenty four hours before he had been telling me what a great thing I had done. I merely nodded.

"I think we did." I emphasized the 'we', possibly a bit too strongly for he bristled visibly.

"Then I suggest 'we' switch the bloody thing off, right now," he said.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible, sir," I said.

"Switch it off, or I'll see you hang for it," the Minister replied.

"As I said, that isn't possible, sir. You see, it's already off. We powered it down right after the demonstration yesterday."

There was a stunned silence around the table, I finally had their full attention. The Minister sat back in his chair, visibly shaken. He ran a hand through his thinning hair, then looked up at me. There was almost a plea in his voice when he spoke again.

"Then what is to be done? What can be done?"

I lit a cigarette to give myself time to think, the small ritual of getting out the old silver case and lighter and lighting up did much to calm me and anchor me in a little patch of reality amid the strangeness. I marshaled my thoughts before replying.

"I've been up all night since I heard about Lewisham," I started. "I have gone over my equations, and over them again. What you have to realize is that the shield you had me build is effectively not of this space and time, it is a barrier that sits just outside our normal perceptions of reality, perceptions which are normally bounded by what our senses have the ability to comprehend."

"What are you saying, man?" one of the Generals said. "Just tell us in plain words what can be done."

"That's just it," I replied. "I don't know. I fear we have unlocked a door to a place that has always existed, but has been closed to us until now. And now that door is swinging open and closed, I have not the slightest idea how to lock it again, I'm not even sure it can be locked."

This time the reaction wasn't silence, it was uproar. Curses were shouted, and I was called names I have not heard since my service in the Navy, but finally the Minister got the room under some semblance of control.

"Just tell me two things" he said. "What is the actual nature of this phenomenon? And can you tell where this 'door' will open next?"

"As I said, its nature cannot be determined as it is not actually real in any sense we can understand it, but in answer to your second question, yes, I believe there is a way to at least guess where it will occur. You have seen the patterns made by magnets and iron filings?"

Several heads nodded around the table.

"Our shield, when it was operating, was effectively one huge magnetic field," I said. "And although it is now switched off, there is still a weak magnetic field in place over London. The openings to, wherever, are occurring in this field and along the lines where iron filings might congregate. I believe if we send out squads of men with compasses, we should be able to in effect map the peaks and troughs and come up with areas that should be evacuated."

That last word brought another uproar around the table. Again it took the Minister to get it under control, and again he was first to speak after silence fell.

"Evacuation has not yet been considered, indeed it might not be possible in a city this size."

"Even so, it might be prudent. . . "

"What is prudent, and what is politically acceptable are sometimes completely different matters," the Minister replied.

I thought then I might be summarily dismissed and shut out of proceedings, but the man surprised me.

"Get your team back on the job," he said. "Right away. I need options to take to the PM, and I need them yesterday."

*

As it turned out, events quickly overtook any thought of planning.

It being a Sunday I had little trouble catching a cab. The difficulty was in seeing one coming, for a thick, typically London, fog had rolled up the river while I was in the meeting and it enveloped everything in a cloying, slightly cold, dampness that seeped through clothes, hair and skin into my bones. I was most grateful to get into the back of the black cab, less so when I discovered I'd picked one of those voluble cabbies who like nothing more than to hear himself talk.

"So what do you make of all this then, Guv'nor? Personally I blame the Germans, they tried to break us when I were a nipper and that didn't work, so now they're back to try to finish the job. If I had my way I'd send them all back where they came from. Bloody foreigners, coming over here and. . . "

I tuned him out, lit another smoke, and pondered what, if any, options I had at my disposal. In truth, I couldn't think of much beyond what I'd already told the Minister, and I didn't think teams of squaddies armed with compasses was a plan that the PM was going to like much. I was still thinking when I noticed the cabbie's tone change, it sounded something like alarm, that, and a hint of fear.

"What's all this then? This ain't right. It ain't right at all."

I only had to look up from my smoke to see what had disturbed him. It was still foggy outside, even thicker than before, but now the fog itself had taken on a tinge of dark green that seemed to almost glow and phosphoresce. The cabbie wound down his window, as if wanting a closer look, and I got an immediate whiff of what smelled like strong malt vinegar.

"Where are we, cabbie?" I asked.

"Somewhere near Tower Bridge, Guv'nor," he replied. "But don't ask me just how near, for I've fair lost me bearings in this shit, pardon my French."

He had brought the cab to a halt. I saw dark shapes both ahead and behind us, other vehicles, also come to a standstill. For a long second it was as if the whole of London stood still, then I heard it, a crash and clamor, loud even through the deadening effect of the fog, the squeal of tortured mental and the grind of stone on stone almost immediately followed by loud splashing. Water slopped around the wheels of the cab as some of the river

suddenly found its way up onto the embankment. The smell of vinegar was stronger now too, stinging, almost unbearably, in my nose and throat.

Something moved in the fog as it waded through the river. There was nothing to see as such, just a space in the fog; whatever made the emptiness was completely invisible to the human eye. But it looked impossibly large both in height and in girth, parting the river such that huge waves slopped all along both shores. I had an impression of a wide blunt head above a misshapen body with far too many limbs before the fog rushed in again and hid it from view. There was more splashing and slopping of water as the thing, whatever it might have been, headed up river and away from our position.

Whatever had happened seemed to be over, for now. But I knew one thing I had not known before, this was no simple physical phenomena, we were dealing with more than just mere manifestations of the great beyond, something, some beast, had come through our shield, and it was this creature that was now terrorizing my city.

We stayed on the embankment for some time, at a standstill until the fog, and the green tinge with it, started to clear. It was only then I saw the source of the noises we had heard, Tower Bridge still had its tall towers at either end, but the central spans, top and bottom, of the old structure were gone, torn asunder and reduced to rubble and torn metal.

My cabbie, not surprisingly, balked at taking me any further. I was forced to make my own way to Greenwich by foot, and it was getting dark by the time I approached the old Barracks. I turned my back to the slight wind to get a cigarette lit, and saw that the West End and city center, all the way back toward me as far as St Paul's, was still shrouded in fog, thick fog that glowed, a sickly green. Far away in the gathering gloom I hard the sound of ambulance bells and sirens and I smelled smoke in the air, smoke and vinegar.

*

Most of my team was already at work in the huts when I arrived, footsore and weary, I discovered that the Minister had rounded them all up immediately after our meeting in Whitehall. A start had been made on what little plan I had, teams of soldiers were out in the city with compasses, reporting back with any anomalous readings. One end of what had been my

office was now a huge map, already covered in red pins with more being pushed in every minute.

I was still standing, staring at it trying to infer a pattern when young George brought me a cup of tea, I shared a cigarette with him as he brought me up to date with what I'd missed during my enforced walk.

"Tower Bridge, London Bridge and Cannon Street Railway station, all gone," he said. "They're still looking for survivors, but there's several hundred dead, and likely to be a lot more."

I looked back at the map, the red pins were indeed starting to resemble a tracing of a magnetic field. Once I looked from Upton Park to Cannon Street, and back again, I saw what I had previously missed, the phenomenon, creature, whatever it might be, was traversing the troughs, and it was now following the largest of them. I went over and traced the route with my finger, it curved in toward a spot near the city center, near Trafalgar Square.

"Our test machine, is it still on, still repelling pigeons?"

"Last time I checked, yes," George said. He had a puzzled look on his face, but I had no time to enlighten him, I had an idea, one that might even turn into a plan, but I might already be too late to put it into action.

The first part of the plan was also going to be the most time consuming and at first seemed an almost impossible undertaking. I had to get our box of tricks, the whole, house-sized lot of it, out of Greenwich and up to Trafalgar Square, and I had to do it fast. My team told me it wasn't going to happen, not unless we had a week.

Luckily the British Army had other ideas. All it took was one phone call to the Ministry and I had as much manpower as I needed. Even then it took more time than I would have wished and we had to work through the night, catching what little snatches of sleep I could. Finally, just before dawn, we left Greenwich in a convoy of military trucks laden with all our equipment, generators, fuel and scientists. The red glow in the sky to the west told me that much of central London was burning, I only hoped we would be in time to save what remained.

*

We were further delayed by the fact that the bridges, all of the bridges, were out, all the way upstream as far as Waterloo Station. Our convoy crawled

through the interminable warren of South London warehouses and markets, but the delay at least meant that I had plenty of time to appraise my team of the plan, what little there was of it.

"I think this thing, creature, beast, whatever it is, is heading for our test box at Nelson's Column," I began. "I believe it is drawn somehow by the magnetic field, following the line of least resistance back to the only source that now exists."

George piped up.

"So why do we need all the gear, Prof?"

"I'm getting to that, I intend to set up in the Square, not far from the other box. If we do this right, we can catch the bally thing between two fields, reverse the polarity of the larger field, and effectively lock the door, with our new friend back safely on the other side."

"There's a lot of assumptions in there, boss," George said.

"I know, that's why I'm relying on you lot to help me get it right, we might only get one chance at this, and it's a long shot, but we might not have much of a city left to save soon if we don't get it done quickly."

We sat in the back of our open topped truck, each of us lost in thought, the smokers among us getting through a succession of cigarettes as the convoy trundled west.

The closer we got to the city center, the more we started to see the effects of the passage of whatever had come up the river. Borough Market at London Bridge was awash with river water, the south bank having been breached, flattened, in several places. Ambulances ferried distraught victims away, and there were many more lying, unmoving, in long lines in the adjoining streets.

And we started to hear sirens and ambulance bells, a clamor of them that reminded me all too clearly of the dark mornings after the blitz. I was further reminded of those hellish times as we passed south of St. Paul's, the old dome that had so famously survived the German bombing had been completely caved in on one side, leaving it looking lopsided, like a broken eggshell. All the king's horses and all the king's men would not be enough to put it back together again, and that one image more than anything else brought reality crashing in, our city was being taken from us, bit by bit.

And it was my job to try and take it back.

*

When we reached Waterloo I though that all our efforts were to be in vain. We had been planning to cross the river at that point, but as we approached, coming up from a detour that had forced us south, we were just in time to see the high domed roof of the Railway Station fall in on itself. Now that I knew what to look for it was obvious that this was not a collapse, it was caused by a great weight being stomped down hard from above. I squinted and peered but apart from a deeper green tinge in the sky, and the tang of vinegar, the creature that was the cause of this latest calamity remained hidden from our view.

The station roof was still falling in on itself as we passed on Waterloo Bridge Road, and we crested the small slope to the bridge itself just in time to see the whole long span of it be pushed and crumpled down into the river, reduced to rubble in seconds. A plume of dust went up in the air and this time I saw a definite shape outlined there. It seemed to be vast, impossibly tall, a huge, what looked as if it might be segmented, tail sweeping what little remained of the bridge into the river as it turned away and headed for Westminster.

Our only option was to follow along the south side of the river and hope to be able to cross at some point. Three truckloads of army men stayed behind, planning to help any survivors that might have been inside the railway station, but as I looked back I saw that the whole station and much of the surrounding area and track had been flattened, almost to ground level. It was Monday morning rush hour and the place would have been busy, but there was no sign of any movement in the rubble, just smoke, and the stench of death.

*

Big Ben struck nine as we finally crossed the river, as if welcoming us to the North bank.

Much to my surprise, Westminster Bridge was still intact. Not only that, there was no sign of any green tinge in the sky, no more indication of ongoing destruction. If it hadn't been for the rising smoke and the distant sound of sirens and bells off to the East it might have been almost any late Autumn day in the city.

I wasn't prepared to look a gift horse in the mouth and we made haste up toward the turn off that would lead onto Whitehall and then up the long

stretch to the Square itself.

Our luck held only as long as it took us to reach the junction, I smelled it first, the now distinctive burn of acidic fumes in nostril and throat, then I felt the road move under us and heard a rumble. I was just in time to see Big Ben topple, or rather be pushed, over into Westminster Bridge Road in a roar of crashing brick and metal. The old bell itself tumbled out of the tower and hit the ground, hard, bouncing almost twenty feet in the air then vanishing over the Embankment and in to the river to fall silent.

The road bounced beneath us again, twice, and the truck's front axle creaked and wailed under the pressure. Whatever this beast was, it was coming up out of the river, and following us as our driver floored the accelerator and sped up Whitehall, scattering cabs and buses and pedestrians in our wake. I happened to have a rear view from my position; as we passed Horseguard's Parade the buildings of Whitehall tumbled, like a row of dominoes given a push from the riverside end. The air filled with dust and smoke, a plume that rose high into the sky, and I got another view of the destroyer, outlined in smoke.

As I have said before it seemed impossibly tall, the flat, almost spade-like head was at least fifty yards above street level, maybe more, and in length, counting the long whipping segmented tail, it had to be nearly a hundred yards long. In look it resembled some great insect, although it appeared to have many more limbs in a most peculiar mixture of parts needed for grasping or parts needs for locomotion, but I had no time for close examination. It was coming up fast behind us as we screeched to a halt at the northern end of Trafalgar Square.

I marshaled the men as well as I was able, setting our stall on the steps of the National Gallery and frantically piecing together the jigsaw of metal, chrome, copper and wiring of our equipment while others hooked up generators to fuel tanks.

"I need somebody over at the equipment at the Column," I said, and young George already had his hand up before I even finished the request.

"It's risky, I can't make this an order," I added.

The lad nodded, he looked almost sick with a combination of fear and excitement, but he had a stout heart.

"I'm your man, boss, it'll make a good story to tell Bettie over a pint later."

I sent him off across the square with instructions to watch for my signal to switch off the box at the column. I watched him go with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Over the top of his head I could see from the trail of destruction that the beast was still coming up Whitehall. It passed Downing Street without any consideration of history or protocol, its tail cutting a sweeping swathe through history as the home of the Empire's highest power was swept aside in a second.

Finally, just as I was thinking we were far too late, I got the nod from the lads, we were ready to go.

"Switch it on," I shouted.

The air filled with a loud hum and the sky took on the green tinge I was coming to hate with a deep-seated loathing. At the same time the beast seemed to thicken and solidify, its cloak of invisibility being swept aside to give us a close look for the first time.

It was indeed some kind of giant bug, insect or crustacean it was impossible for me to tell. The head had two, large, yellow compound eyes, a watery red biting mouth and long livid-blue feelers that rose higher still, tasting the air. The front pair of limbs, waving over the ruin of the city, were almost lobster-like, huge red pincers that clacked like the sound of gunfire. The body itself was long, and looked too thin for the head and tail, and there were definitely more than six, or even eight, limbs, many more. It was by far the most peculiar thing I have ever had cause to witness.

Gunfire echoed around me as the soldiers alongside us tried to put up a defense, but their bullets seemed to pass straight through the creature with no effect, and it kept coming forward, heading straight for Nelson's Column. My eyes, nose and throat stung with the stench of strong acid, and I struggled to see through sudden tears.

The beast kept coming until it loomed over the Column, its head level with old Nelson's, its compound eyes, each yards across, meeting the old sailor's steady one-eyed gaze. I saw poor George, dwarfed and looking lost and tiny, standing next to our kit at the base of the Column beside the lion guard. I waited until the last possible moment, when the beast was almost touching Nelson's statue, then waved.

Everything seemed to happen at once, George switched off the box at his end and green light flared, brighter than the sun, in a high canopy hanging over the whole square. The beast reared up, and grabbed at the Column.

Admiral Nelson swayed and rocked, then toppled, the whole column coming down and burying our box, and poor George with it, under tons of stone and dust and rubble.

The kit at my back on the Gallery steps whined and screeched, the beast screeched back at it and clacked the huge pincers, somehow, it looked angry. The great tail came round, if it hit where it had been aimed it was going to flatten the whole north side of the square.

Blue sparks of electricity flew all around and my box of tricks hummed, buzzed and whined, the sound rising, and rising again until the scream threatened to puncture my ears, then, as I had hoped it might, it blew, the explosion knocking all of us present to the ground. I lay there, thunder roaring in my ears, looking up as the segmented tail swept overhead, and kept right on going, passing through the Grecian pillars of the old Gallery building as if it wasn't there. The bulk of the creature's body passed over the top of my head. One of its legs came down, straight for me, and I flinched, but felt nothing as the green sky turned to blue and the beast faded back to wherever it had come from. The last thing to go was a lingering tang of vinegar in the air.

It seemed we had succeeded, the door had once again been locked.

A great silence fell over central London, as if the whole city paused for breath, then I was on my feet, running across the rubble-strewn square to the base of the column. I feared the worst, but just as I got there young George pulled himself out of a pile of fallen stones. He had many cuts and bruises, and was going to need a new suit, but he seemed none the worse for wear.

"Well," he said as I ran up to him and shook his hand. "Bettie's never going to believe this one."

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The Colour That Came To Chiswick

I hoped that my friend Sherlock Holmes would be more settled when I called on him that evening in May of '87. His recovery from his travails in France, and the subsequent excitement in Reigate, meant that a period of house rest was prescribed. As ever, he paid little attention to my ministrations and pleadings, and over the course of the previous fortnight had driven poor Mrs. Hudson to despair with a series of petty requests.

On my last visit she had pleaded with me to do my best to calm my *patient*. Indeed, she had worked herself into such a state that I do believe that had any longer time passed it would have been her and not Holmes who would be coming under my ministrations.

It was Holmes himself who greeted me as I entered the apartments in Baker Street.

"Come in Doctor Watson," he said in a near perfect impression of Mrs. Hudson's Scots brogue. "You'll be wanting some tea?"

He laughed, and fair bounded up the stairs to his apartment. I had not seen him in such good humour for several months.

I discovered why on entering his rooms. . . he had a new case. Several sheaves of paper lay scattered on his desk, his brass microscope was in use off to one side, and a glass retort bubbled and seethed above a paraffin burner. An acrid odour hung in the air, thick, almost chewable. The whole place reeked of it, despite the fact that that the windows were all open to their fullest extent.

Holmes noticed my discomfort.

"It is nothing," he said.

"I doubt Mrs. Hudson will agree," I said.

"Do not worry Watson," Holmes said. "Our esteemed landlady has gone to Earls Court with the widow Murray."

"The Wild West show? Yes, I have seen the posters around town. It is said it will be a great spectacle."

I had wished to inquire as to Holmes' opinion on the authenticity of Mr. Cody's show, but it was obvious that his mind was already elsewhere. He

stood over the microscope, studying the slide contents intently.

"What have you got there Holmes?"

In answer he passed me a sheet of paper.

"This came in several hours ago."

It was a note on letter-headed paper, from the Fullers Brewery in Chiswick, and addressed to *Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective* at this Baker Street address. The note proved to be short and to the point.

"Dear Mr. Holmes," it began. "In the past three days we have encountered several problems with our brewing processes in our main Tuns. We suspect sabotage, but are unable to prove the cause, and our own chemists have drawn a blank. I have sent a sample from our latest fermentation, and would appreciate some of your time in its study. I shall be happy to discuss your remuneration by return of post."

It was signed, *Gerard Jones, Chief Brewer*.

"Examine the paper," Holmes said. "There is something peculiar on the left edge near the bottom."

I immediately saw what he meant. The edge seemed bevelled and on closer examination proved to have a greenish tinge.

"What is it Holmes? Some form of algal growth perhaps?"

"That is what I am trying to determine," Holmes replied. "But so far I am having little success."

He motioned me towards a jar that had been partially hidden behind the microscope.

"The sample mentioned within the letter is there. See what you make of it Watson."

As soon as I picked up the jar I knew I had never seen anything like it before.

The jar held a pint of fluid but it did not look like anything resembling any fermentation of ale I had ever seen. As I held it up towards my face the contents shifted and the acrid odour grew so strong that I almost gagged as it caught at the back of my throat. The fluid was thick, almost solid, and a deep emerald green. It flowed, as if the whole thing were a single organism.

"It seems to have some of the properties of a slime mould," Holmes said. "And it responds to external stimuli with a range of defensive adaptations."

Holmes took the jar from me and placed it close to the paraffin burner. The green substance surged, piling up against the glass wall of the container.

"And this is in the vats in the brewery?"

Holmes nodded.

"It would appear so. Our task is to prove whether it has been introduced deliberately, or whether it is an accident of nature of some kind."

Holmes allowed me to study the sample he had mounted on a microscope slide. There was no evidence of any cellular structure, or any differentiation in the material. Nothing existed to show that the thing was in anyway alive. Yet it clearly moved. Even the small amount present on the slide pushed and surged against its confines with such violence that I stood back quickly in surprise. In doing so I knocked the bottom stage of the microscope, and swung the mirror away such that it no longer lit on the slide. I bent to rectify the problem but stopped as soon as I looked in the eyepiece.

Despite the lack of lights I could still clearly see the sample. It glowed, a faint green luminescence. When I pointed this out to Holmes he at once drew the curtains and dimmed the lamps. It immediately became apparent that there was even more to our problem material than we realised.

The full expanse of Holmes desk glowed a sickly green, the miasma hanging in the air a full two feet or more above the surface. Holmes showed me his hands. . . they too shone dimly.

I frog-marched him downstairs and both of us scoured our hands with carbolic soap until no trace of green remained. When we went back upstairs the sight that met us made us pause in the doorway.

The curtains were still drawn closed, and the darkness only accentuated the effect. The sample jar sat square in the middle of Holmes' desk and the air seemed to dance, an aurora of light hovering in an almost perfect globe around it.

Armed with vinegar and salt I set to cleaning and disinfecting as much as I could see. Holmes could scarcely take his eyes from the jar and merely stood, contemplating the sheer *strangeness* of it, as I worked.

I was nearly finished in my task when a knock came downstairs. Holmes requested that I answer, and I went down, opening the door on Inspector Lestrade. He too was given pause by the sight of the jar on the desk, and

might have been standing there yet had Holmes not pressed him on his business. Even then he did not take his eyes from the jar.

"I understand you are commissioned on following up on the sabotage at the Fullers Brewery?"

Holmes refused to either confirm or deny this fact, as Lestrade continued.

"The saboteur has upped the ante," he said. "We have a brewer in hospital and foul play is suspected. . . a poison as yet unidentified." He was still staring at the desk. "I presume this came from Chiswick?"

As ever Holmes stayed quiet, but he did request that I accompany Lestrade to the hospital to talk to the stricken man.

Holmes motioned towards the jar.

"The study of this requires more rigor than I can provide here," he said. "I shall remove this to the safety of a laboratory at the University and seek council from several Society Fellows. I shall meet you later in the Brewery."

*

Lestrade was unusually quiet in the carriage on the way to the hospital, and would not speak of the condition of the victim.

"I would rather not prejudice your opinion Doctor," was all he would say on the matter. I began to understand why when I was shown into a small room in the hospital. The corridor outside smelled strongly of carbolic soap, and I saw a strange reticence on the part of the staff to venture close to the doorway.

I walked inside to find a young man writhing on the bed, tearing at his throat.

I called for assistance and moved to his aid. A bloody dressing, a green smudge clearly visible, lay discarded on the bedcovers. As I entered the man's head turned to look at me. The whole bottom half of his face was a bubbling mess of green-tinged gore.

Lestrade came quickly to my side and pinned the man's arms, holding him down. Just the sight of us seemed to calm him somewhat, but he was obviously in great pain. His wounds seethed, the green slime seeming to feast on his flesh. I have seen many men die of disease and corruption in warmer climes, but nothing of this speed or destructive capability.

I had just bent to tend to the man when he screamed louder and his eye *popped*. Green-tinged fluid ran down his cheek and started to bubble at the join of neck and shoulder. The covers fell away from his chest and Lestrade moved aside, retching. Below the waist there was little left of the man, merely a rolling mess of green slime. The patient was past caring. He gripped my left hand tight and squeezed, just once, before the life went out of him completely.

I decided not to wait to see if the slime would continue progressing after the death of its host. I dragged a sickly-looking Lestrade from the room and called once more for assistance. This time it was forthcoming.

The poor man's remains were quickly removed, and both Lestrade and I went with them to the incinerator, standing there for long minutes to ensure that the job was done properly. I also ensured that all who had been in contact with the patient, Lestrade and myself included, washed thoroughly with soap and hot water. I checked us both for any hint of the slime. Lestrade continued to look pale and sickly, even after I gave us the all clear.

"What in God's name did that to the man?" he asked me. I'm afraid I did not have an answer for him. But I resolved there and then to find out. I would not stand to watch any more men die in such a fashion – not if I was able to do something about it.

I left Lestrade in the hospital to clear up the situation and headed for the brewery.

*

It was late evening by the time the carriage deposited me outside the brewery. The sound of cheering and applause came faintly across the river from where Mrs. Hudson was no doubt enjoying the spectacle of the gunplay and horsemanship. Standing there in the quiet dark I began to regret not bringing my own weapon on the trip.

There was no sign of Holmes, nor indeed of anyone else. I knew that any large London brewery should be running an overnight operation, given the thirst of the population for their product. For the brewery to be sitting in darkness was an ominous sign. I considered waiting for Holmes, but all my thoughts were on the sight of that poor man's pitiful death in the hospital room. I had a feeling that, if I wanted to stop further deaths, I would need to move quickly. This contagion had a manner that suggested it would spread

rapidly. It was not as Holmes' companion, but as a doctor, that I crossed the road to the brewery.

I was grateful for what little light came from the gas lamps around the walls, but their flame only accentuated the shadows in the tall empty hall. Four large copper vats dominated the floor space. The air smelled almost sweet, with a hint of bitterness where fresh hops joined the tang of fermentation. Beneath these well-remembered odors I also sensed something new – a hint of the same acrid tang that had assaulted my passages back in Holmes' room. Before I stepped further than the doorway I peered into all the corners, searching for any trace of the luminescence. I found none. Nevertheless it was with some trepidation I stepped inside.

It was obvious to me that someone had deliberately introduced a poisonous material into the brewing vats. Their reason was as yet unclear to me, but the thought that this might have been going on for some time made my blood run cold. There might even, at this very moment, be drinkers quaffing tainted ales all across the capital. In my mind's eye I saw the slime *seethe* in the flagons, see the terror in the drinkers' eyes as the contagion took them and started to feed. The fear of the consequences strengthened my resolve. I moved further inside.

A cloud moved. Suddenly moonlight washed through the hall from above. It made my search somewhat easier. I found nothing around the nearer of the two vats and almost relaxed. That all changed when I rounded the third vat and almost walked into a mist of green luminescence. As I moved closer I saw that it rose from a body on the floor – the remains of what had been a man but was now a seething mass of green protoplasm. The slime seemed to notice my presence and began to slump and flow over the brewery floor, moving so quickly that I was forced to take several dancing steps backwards.

My retreat was halted as the luminescence swelled and flared, engulfing me in a globe of dancing light. Suddenly I felt calm, almost serene. Shadows danced around me, wraiths made of little more than thin green fog. I felt no fear, no compulsion to run -- merely the innocent curiosity of a child. I stepped forward towards the rolling carpet of green.

The arrival of my friend Sherlock Holmes saved my life. All he did was place a hand on my shoulder, but that was sufficient to break the spell under

which I had been placed. I looked down to see the green slime merely inches from the toes of my brogues and getting closer.

Holmes stepped forward and threw a handful of white powder over the green carpet. It immediately retreated, black pustules bubbling and bursting across the surface. My eyes started to sting and water. Holmes turned and smiled grimly, showing me another handful of white powder sitting in a leather-gloved hand.

"Caustic soda," he said. "It seems to be efficacious."

He wore a canvas satchel over his shoulder. It gaped open, showing it to be crammed full with the powder. Before I could inquire further Holmes strode away from me, following the retreating slime.

"Come Watson," he called. "Let us beard Grendel in his lair."

I followed, keeping at a distance to stay out of reach of the scattering of lye.

The slime dragged itself away before the powder. A high, fluting cacophony echoed and whistled around us, as if the bubbling pustules screamed in agony. Within seconds Holmes had the remains of the creature cornered where it had retreated under the copper vat in the leftmost rear of the brewery.

Holmes continued to throw handfuls of lye, at the same time calling out to me over his shoulder.

"Watson. I have need of your old pen-knife."

I moved forward, following Holmes' gaze. There was a large dent in the tun just above head height. Deep inside was a small lump of darker material, like a pebble embedded in the copper.

I took out my knife and started to work the pebble free while Holmes kept the carpet of slime at bay. I was so intent on my task I did not notice the new arrivals on the brewery floor, only becoming aware of them when Holmes called out in despair.

"No. Not yet!"

I managed to free the pebble and dropped it into my waistcoat pocket. I turned to see three men clad in oilskins standing behind Holmes. They each carried long hoses and were spraying the floor all around. Suddenly the place smelled less like a brewery and more like a hospital as soap and bleach washed over our feet.

My brogues were ruined, as were Holmes' leather boots, but he had not yet noticed. His gaze was fixed on a drain in the center of the floor. It sat in a slight dip, such that all spillage would flow that way. The pressure from the hoses washed across the slime and sent it sailing in bubbling foam.

"Stop!" Holmes called, but it was too late. The last hint of the green substance disappeared down to the sewers below.

*

We found Lestrade out in the street coordinating proceedings. The hosing down of the brewery went on for several hours while we stood outside, smoking a pipe and keeping an eye out for any return of either the slime or the luminescence. After a time Lestrade announced himself satisfied and called off the clear up. Holmes proved harder to satisfy. He insisted on waiting until almost dawn, spending the intervening hours stalking the floor and peering in every corner of the brewery. Twice he asked to see the *pebble* I had dug from the vat. Both times he returned it to me with a grunt of displeasure. The sun was throwing an orange tinge across the sky before I was finally able to persuade him to leave.

He said nothing in the carriage on the journey to Baker Street, merely sat, elbows on his thighs and fingers steepled at his lips, deep in thought.

Mrs. Hudson ministered to our hunger, providing a hearty breakfast that I took to with gusto. Holmes scarcely ate a mouthful. He had already taken the pebble from me, and pored over it intently, subjecting it to a variety of assays and investigations. By the time I finished my breakfast he seemed to have come to some conclusions. He called me over and handed me a magnifying lens.

"I believe we have found our source," he said to me. I immediately saw what he meant. The *pebble* was a small rough stone. Holmes had managed to slice it in half and I looked down at the inner hemisphere. There was a small hollow almost dead center, hardly bigger than my little finger nail. It carried the barest tinge of green.

"The stone itself is mostly iron," Holmes said. "With a trace of nickel. I do believe you are holding your first visitor from beyond this planet."

After that Holmes seemed to settle somewhat. We sat by the fire and fired up our pipes. He repeatedly quizzed me on my *experience* inside the luminescence.

"It was dashed peculiar Holmes," I said. "I have experienced something similar before, while watching a Swami perform the rope trick in Delhi, but even there I felt in control. This time it felt like my very will had been drained from me. If you had not intervened, I do believe I would have given myself to it."

Holmes nodded, and went back to staring into the fire.

I left in the early morning to fulfill an obligation to a sick friend. When I returned Holmes was scarcely in any better spirits. I found him on the doorstep, delivering instructions to a group of urchins who were gathered around him as he distributed pennies.

As I entered I saw Mrs. Hudson packing materials back into the cupboard she used for her cleaning materials.

"Please Doctor. Can you not get him to settle? He'll be the death of me with all this commotion."

Holmes seemed oblivious to his landlady's protestations.

"We must be vigilant," he said as we once more sat by the fire. "As a doctor you well know the dangers of contagion re-emerging after a period of dormancy."

I saw that a black mood had descended on my friend, one that only action might shift. But there was no news forthcoming. In the late afternoon I went to stoke the fire. I searched for the old pair of bellows I customarily used, but they were nowhere to be found, and Holmes merely smiled at my mention of them.

We sat in conversation as darkness started to fall once again, our discussions ranging wildly with much speculation as to the nature of the green organism. But despite our intellects, we were unable to come to any firm conclusions. And I disagreed vehemently with one of Holmes' conclusions.

"I suspect a rudimentary intelligence is at work," Holmes said. "That much was obvious in the way you yourself were lured into the trap."

I tried to argue the case for instinct, and cited the many examples in the animal world of trap setting. But by then Holmes was once more deep in thought, and I contented myself with a fresh pipe of tobacco as I made some notes on the progress on the case so far.

*

Matters came to a head in the late evening.

"My eyes and ears are ready to report anything out of the usual," Holmes had said.

The news brought by the urchin who came to the door certainly qualified as *out of the usual.* To my eyes he looked like any other grime-ingrained child of the streets, but Holmes immediately saw something I had not.

"It is on a boat?" he asked, even before the child had spoken.

The child smiled, showing more gaps than teeth.

"That it is Mr. Holmes sir. ‘Tis down at Vauxhall Bridge. They say ‘tis a *ghost ship*, for it is all quiet and green like. Ain't nobody going near ‘till the coppers have had a look. That Inspector Lestrade has been sent for."

Holmes gave the lad a three-penny piece and sent him on his way. I was dispatched to find a carriage post-haste. Holmes himself went back inside and returned wearing his heavy winter coat. It seemed to bulge at the back, as if he carried something bulky underneath, but I knew from experience not to ask until he was ready for his revelation.

I only asked one question on the trip down to Vauxhall.

"How did you know about the boat Holmes?"

He smiled thinly.

"The boy had fresh pitch on his fingers. I smelled it even before I saw it. There is only one place you find tar so easily identifiable – on the deck of a boat."

He said no more as we bounced through the city, rattling like peas inside the cab. Holmes had requested speed and offered extra payment. The driver did not disappoint and had us at Vauxhall in record time, if a little shaken.

A small crowd had gathered on the bridge, looking down at a moored boat. Despite the fact it was not quite yet full dark, the luminescence was immediately apparent, a dancing green light that ran up the masts and along the rigging of a long schooner. The gathered watchers had the good sense to stay well back.

The same could not be said of the two policemen down on the dock itself. Holmes shouted down a warning, but they took no heed, stepping onto the boat while we were as yet too far away to go to their aid. By the time

Holmes and I descended the steps to the dock the policemen had already gone aboard and disappeared down into the hold.

Holmes was in no mood to wait. He ran down the steps and I was hard pressed to keep up with him as he jumped on board the boat. I joined him at the hatchway leading to the hold. I realized we were already inside the glow of the luminescence but I felt none of the compulsion I had undergone earlier. Nevertheless my heart beat a little faster as we went down in to the bowels of the vessel.

Screams rose from beneath us. Holmes shed his overcoat. I stood behind him so was not able to see the full scope of the apparatus, but he carried two metal tanks on his back, secured at the shoulders with thick canvas straps. The tanks looked heavy, but did not slow Holmes any as he descended the steep steps to the hold. Saying a silent prayer I followed close behind.

At first it seemed we stood in impenetrable darkness but as my eyes adjusted I began to make out shape and shadow around us. The screams we had followed had already faded, replaced by the sound of piteous weeping to our left. I could make out Holmes ahead of me as we moved towards the wails.

We were too late to do anything for the poor policemen. One lay dead, green foam at lips and ears. The other would be following him soon. Most of his chest was a bubbling ruin. He tried to speak but more green fluid poured at his mouth and even as I bent to his aid he fell back, eyes wide, staring unseeing.

I realized I could see Holmes' face, his pale features seemingly behind a green mask. I turned to see the source of this new light. The whole far end of the hold was an aurora, sickly green shot through with an oily sheen that cast rainbows before it. Under other circumstances it might even be called beautiful.

Below the swirling lights lay a darker patch that seemed to *ripple*. I saw two ale casks, broken into splinters – the source of this recent outbreak.

Holmes walked forward towards it. I saw he held his fire-bellows in hand. A soft hose led to the tank on his back. He pushed the bellows together and sent a spray of liquid ahead of him. I smelled bleach. The shimmering light flared then faded and the dark green mass retreated.

Holmes kept walking, close enough to reach out towards the green luminescence.

"Careful Holmes," I called.

"I must know," he said, almost a whisper. "Is it an invader, or a missionary?"

Before I could stop him he stepped inside the glow. I was about to step up beside him, but he raised a hand. I heard his voice as if from a great distance.

"Stay back Watson," he said. "This won't take but a minute."

The dancing light played around him and the green carpet at his feet seethed, but still Holmes stood perfectly still. I saw him reach forward with his free hand and play it through the light. A new rainbow followed his movements.

"Fascinating," I heard him say, then he went completely quiet. The slime at his feet started to creep again, moving towards Holmes. He showed no sign of trying to avert it. I moved to one side to look at his face. He had a glazed, far off look, lost in reverie.

He had fallen into its snare.

With a yell I leapt forward, just as the slime surged. As he had done for me, I placed a hand on his shoulder. At once the spell was broken. . . and just in time. The light flared so bright as to be almost blinding. At the same moment the slime surged, a wave flowing over Holmes' feet and ankles. He pushed at the bellows, twice, washing bleach around us. Once again I heard the high fluting screams, deafening in the confines of the hold, as pustules formed and burst all across the creeping carpet.

The slime retreated.

I pulled at Holmes' shoulder.

"Quick Holmes, let us beat a retreat before it returns."

"Not yet Watson. There is something at the heart of this that bends its will against us. I would rather like to have a look at it."

He washed more bleach in the direction of the slime and it fell back.

It was darker now, the luminescence having shrunk and faded until it ran in a layer less than an inch thick over the surface of the rolling slime. We followed its retreat across the hold until we stood before the burst and

broken barrels. The remains of the slime had retreated to the shelter of a curved section that remained nearly intact.

Holmes motioned me forward and we peered into the gloom.

"Take a close look Watson," Holmes said. "We may never see its like again."

A darker patch of green sat there in the midst of the last small puddle of slime, an oval shape like a large dark egg. An oily green sheen ran over it and it pulsed rhythmically, almost as if it were breathing.

"Is this the source of the contagion?" I asked.

Holmes nodded.

"Although I am no longer sure of its intelligence. I detected nothing while under its influence to suggest it is anything other than what it seems."

I watched the thing pulse.

"And what do you suggest Holmes? We cannot allow this thing to escape into the general population."

Holmes was deep in thought.

"Indeed Watson. And while the scientists at the University would love to study this, there is a chance that the military would gain hold of it. I have heard of their experiments with Mustard gas. This thing would merely give them another excuse for developing weapons of terrible destruction."

I could see it in my mind. Whole battalions marching on a field of green, heads raised to the heavens in screams as they *melted* from the feet up.

My decision was simple.

"End it, Holmes. End it here."

He nodded and squeezed the bellows. The slime surged, one last time, then fell back, smoking. One final high whistle pierced the air then it was gone.

We stood there for a long time, watching, but all that remained of the terror from beyond was a patch of blackened material among the remains of the barrels.

Ripples in the Ether

As usual, I heard Challenger several seconds before I saw him.

"Get a quote from the old man," McGuire had said at our editorial meeting that morning. "You'll need to beef out the tale a good bit before we can run it. . . it's far too thin, even for an August edition."

McGuire hadn't believed there was a story in it at all, just a "silly-season" tale of something in the sky over Glasgow. "The citizens of that city have a reputation for exaggeration, especially when there might be a drink in it for them," he said. But he couldn't deny his own eyes. There *was* a picture; blurred and out of focus but a picture nonetheless.

So here I was, standing on Challenger's doorstep, and already knowing what my one-time travelling companion would say on seeing the photograph. I knocked again, but still didn't get an answer. Inside the house, Challenger was railing against *something*. I could hear him clearly, even though the thick door.

"Ten shillings a year that bloody license costs. You would think for that money they might check their facts first."

There was an almighty *crash*, followed by what sounded to me like a bellow of pain. I put my shoulder to the door, twice before it gave, and forced my way in, only to find Challenger standing in his study amid the wreckage of a Pye 2-valve radio set. He jumped up and down on it, crushing valves and woodwork alike into little more than glass and splinters.

"Ten shillings you say?" I said, trying to sound casual. "I think you'll find it's more like ten pounds for a new one of *those*."

Challenger finally took notice of my presence.

"Malone? What in blazes are you doing here?"

I motioned at the remains of the radio set.

"I might ask you the same thing old chap."

He smiled wryly.

"Dashed broadcasters can't even get a Latin name right. Chapman-Andrews has found fossilised dinosaur eggs in Mongolia - fine examples of *Protoceratops*. Damned radio said they were *Prototeratops.*"

I laughed.

"And your poor set deserved what it got did it?"

Challenger kicked the debris into a corner and immediately forgot about it.

"Bloody waste of time anyway. Who wants to listen to voices in the ether all day?"

He motioned me to a chair by the fire. We got pipes going and blew smoke at each other for a spell while I tried to find a way to broach the subject at hand. In the end I settled for just passing him the photograph.

His reaction was exactly as I had expected.

"It's obviously fake," he said, and went to pass it back when something in the picture caught his eye. "Where was this taken?"

"Somewhere up on the Firth of Clyde," I said. "There's a bit of a flap on. Some say it's a new weapon the Germans are testing."

Challenger grunted.

"Bally Germans don't have the money to be testing *anything* for some years yet," he said. "And it's no more than a water drop on the camera lens, any fool can see that."

"In that case, there are a lot of fools in Glasgow," I replied. "For we have no fewer than twenty eye witness accounts as to the photograph's veracity."

He grunted again at that, then started to pay closer attention when I mentioned the plant die-off in Arrochar and Milngavie.

"Flattened and burned you say?"

I nodded.

"More like *toasted* according to all of the accounts."

I went on to give some description of what the witnesses were reporting, from strange lights in the sky to ruined crops, and even weirder accounts of *fairies* singing in the night from the Hebrides. By now Challenger was only halfway paying attention to me. He had a map out, and was marking off points as I mentioned the incidents. Then, with a ruler and a pencil, he starting trying to join the dots, obviously looking for a pattern.

Equally obviously, this proved fruitless and resulted merely in a random pattern of lines drawn in a heavy hand on the map. He snapped the ruler in two and threw the bits into the same corner as the remains of his radio set.

"This won't do Malone," he said, bristling with indignation. "This won't do at all. There's something going on here, and I can't put my hand on it yet. There's nothing else for it. We'll just have to go and see for ourselves. How's your expense account?"

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And so it was, later that same afternoon, we settled in a first-class carriage making for Glasgow Central. Challenger's booming sermon on the evils of public radio had already cleared two old ladies from the compartment and sent them scurrying into the next carriage for some peace and quiet, leaving me to study the old chap while the rant continued.

It had been ten years and more since our adventure in the Amazon, but time had been kinder to Challenger than it had to me. He had wrinkles around the eyes now when he laughed, and some gray at the temples and in his beard, but they only served to give him an air of distinguished statesmanship. His broad shoulders had not yet started to slump, and *the voice* was as strident and booming as it had ever been. It was only when talk turned to his wife's illness that I saw the older man he would be in years to come.

"They say there is still hope," he said, his voice suddenly soft, almost tremulous. "And that is what I cling to. But I do not know what I will do should she be taken from me."

That was all he would say, and it was the closest to intimacy that he'd allowed himself to come with me for some time. Now he seemed almost embarrassed by it. He covered it in bluster and more pronouncements on the perils of mass broadcast radio. I let him say his piece while studying once again the photograph that had started us on this journey.

It looked innocuous enough. Yes, it did indeed look like little more than a water droplet on the lens, one that was teardrop shaped and just about to start a dribble down the glass. But the observers on the ground had been photographed pointing at the appropriate spot in the sky, and several had found the experience frightening enough to report it to the authorities. If it *was* a hoax, it was a dashed large one involving doctors, policemen and dockhands alike.

Challenger and I had already resolved to visit the site where the picture was taken which was on the south coast of the river Clyde, just south of where the river widened into the Firth proper. On arrival in Glasgow I expected Challenger to be champing at the bit to get going, but, not for the first time, he surprised me.

"What kind of reporter are you anyway?" he said with a wide grin as we checked in to the Central Hotel. "Everybody in this city knows *exactly* where to go to get the latest information on anything whatsoever. Meet me back down here in half-an-hour and we'll see what we can do about your further education."

A quick wash and a shave later and I arrived back in the lobby in time to meet Challenger. He gripped me hard at the shoulder, reminding me, lest I had forgotten, that he had the strength of a bull, and half-dragged me across the busy thoroughfare outside the railway station and down a tall narrow alleyway that I would not have entered of my own free will.

"Welcome to the house of knowledge," Challenger said, and it was only then I spotted the pub sign. A large brass horseshoe hung over an old oak door. Opening the door let out noise, smoke, and the unmistakable smell of strong beer. Challenger strode in as if he owned the place.

Indeed, it seemed he was known, for the barman greeted him warmly.

"Nice to see you back Professor. What'll it be. . . beer or the *cratur*?"

"Best make it beer. For now," Challenger said, and his booming laugh rang around the room. I had a flagon of dark brown ale thrust into my hand. I took it to a corner table and sipped at it while watching in amazement as Challenger worked the room.

Some of the customers, especially the older men, seemed to know Challenger well, and he in turn seemed to know their names, and even enough to inquire after their families. At the same time he asked about anything *strange* in town, and collected a variety of stories. The bar was too noisy for me to catch any more than snippets, but I saw him pass coins, and even a five-pound note, across the table on several occasions. He had a large smile on his face when he joined me with a fresh beer for each of us.

"The bait is in the trap," he said and drained a large gulp of beer. "It seems your story is larger than we imagined, for the weird has become commonplace around here in recent days."

I laughed.

"I should get you a job at the paper. You're a natural."

He laughed back.

"Only in here. It's an old haunt from years back and they know me well."

"I have noticed. I did not know you'd even been to Glasgow before."

The laugh this time was loud enough to stop all conversation in the bar.

"Been? I was born just down the coast from here, studied theory in Edinburgh, but studied life itself in this very bar."

A cry went up for a song and again Challenger amazed me by standing up and, at the top of his voice, starting to sing. Contrary as ever, he gave the Scots in the bar a perfect rendition of *Men of Harlech* to which everyone joined in with gusto. Flagons were bashed on tables, feet were stamped in time and Challenger's grin grew ever wider as he came to a rousing climax and the customers roared in appreciation.

His smile stayed as, once the bar settled somewhat, a small man came over and passed him a note. Challenger took his old map from his jacket and spread it out on the table. On reading the note he started marking points with a pencil.

"There have been another three reports today," he said. "Strange lights over water and plants dying off. This is all connected, and there is a method in it. I'm sure of it." He banged his fist on the table in frustration. "But the pattern still eludes me."

I was about to call it a night and suggest that we retire to be better prepared for a trip down the coast in the morning, and indeed Challenger seemed close to agreement. But that all changed when a red-faced and breathless boy arrived at a rush.

"Dad, it's the sky," he said. "The sky's singing. And it's on fire!"

Most of the bar's customers merely laughed and went back to their drinking, but Challenger was already on his feet and I had to hurry to catch him as he stepped outside.

It was not just the sky that seemed afire. The whole alleyway was bathed in a red glow, shimmering like oil on a hot skillet. Looking up past the tall canyon made by the adjoining buildings I saw that the sky itself was full of dancing clouds in bright yellow and orange.

And yes, they were indeed singing.

At first it sounded like an atonal choir trying to be heard in a strong wind. It seemed to come in pulses, fading in and out at irregular intervals. I started to point that out to Challenger but he pushed me aside brusquely.

"Hush man. I'm counting."

He started to make notes on the back of his map and I knew better than to interrupt him again. He only looked up as the light from above started to dim, the shifting clouds moving away in a southerly direction.

"Quick lad," he said, and laughed again. "Your story is getting away."

He took off down the alley, following the direction the cloud was taking. As he seemed to know where he was going, I followed, feeling the beer swill around in an otherwise empty stomach as he led me at pace through a warren of narrow streets, the buildings blackened with soot and the cobbles slippery underfoot from a recent shower. We crossed two busy thoroughfares but were not bothered by either pedestrians or tram-cars; the whole city seemed to have come to a standstill, looking skywards.

The *singing* seemed to come from every direction and none at all, and it had become louder, taking on an almost hollow echo that reminded me of nothing less than a monastic chant such as you might hear in one of the old cathedral cities in the quiet evening air. It felt almost *peaceful*.

If Challenger was feeling any such peace, he did not show it. His sights were set to the south, where the color concentration in the cloud seemed brightest.

"I see it Malone. Hurry man. We're catching it."

I followed his shambling bulk through more alleyways, then into a ruck of bystanders that he brushed aside with all the grace of a charging bull. But even he came to a shocked stop at the view that awaited us.

We had arrived at the riverside.

A crowd, some five deep, lined the whole length of the north shore, and every one of them stared at a spot in the center of the river. A red mist hung over and around a tall, suspended footbridge, and it was from here that the *singing* emanated. The mist itself seemed almost solid, yet continuously shifting and swirling as if driven by some internal churning. But its overall shape exactly matched something I'd seen before – a teardrop just about to start its dribble down a window.

Challenger's pause had only been momentary. He had already pushed his way to the front of the crowd and seemed intent on heading closer to the footbridge. The strange *singing* increased in volume again, and I felt it like a vibration in the pit of my stomach, as if I stood too close to someone playing only the deepest bass notes on a large church organ. I had to force down sudden nausea as I made my through the crowd towards Challenger.

He had stopped again, some twenty yards shy of the footbridge, and was once more taking notes, marking the rhythm and counting beats between tones. I noted with some dismay that he was bleeding from his left ear, and even as I spotted it I felt something *give* in my nasal passages and tasted blood as it dripped through to my lips.

"Come away man," I said as I reached him, and put a hand on his shoulder. At that very same moment the *singing* reached a concussive crescendo, a vibration that shook the very fiber of my being and threatened to knock me down into blackness. My vision dimmed so that even now I am not completely sure of what I saw next, but it seemed to me that the red haze started to pulse, almost as if it were breathing. It rose, gracefully as a balloon on a still day, and drifted silently off into the night trailing smoky tendrils in its wake. It left behind a smoldering ruin of buckled girders and split wood – all that remained of what had once been the footbridge.

It was only later, as I lay abed in my hotel room trying to quiet the buzzing in my head that I remembered what the haze had resembled as it floated off – a giant jellyfish, swimming in a clear sea, heading for the depths.

*

Challenger was not to give me any chance to sleep off the headache that the damned *singing* had brought on. He banged on my room door just as the first dim sunlight showed through the thick curtains, and came in without being asked.

"I have it Malone," he said, waving a sheaf of papers in my face as I rose, slightly groggy, from bed. While I washed and dressed he explained it to me – or at least he tried to. I was still befuddled and understood barely a half of what he said – something to do with mathematics, Fibonacci and a universal rhythmic messaging system. He sighed in loud exasperation as, after finishing my ablutions, I expressed continued bemusement.

"Look," he said, in exactly the same tone he might use to explain something to a five-year old. "It's really very simple when you see it."

Once again he took out his old map and spread it on the table. It had been scrawled all over with straight lines in black pencil.

"I've seen that already," I said, shaking my head. "I still can't make head nor tail of it."

"Ah, but you haven't seen this," Challenger replied. He took a pencil from his pocket and started to draw freehand in a circular motion, connecting all the dots that made up reports of strange happenings. He stood back and waved with a flourish, as if he was a magician at the reveal of a trick.

I looked down.

There was now a large spiral marked on the map, its outermost reach being in the Inner Hebrides, and with the line converging down to a central spot somewhere out on the northern banks of the Firth of Clyde.

"It's a descending Fibonacci series producing a Golden Spiral," Challenger said proudly, as if that explained anything. "And that infernal *chanting* followed the same descending sequence. I should have seen it sooner."

Half an hour later, after a quick breakfast of weak tea and stale toast, he was still trying to explain the *how* of the thing as we boarded the train for Helensburgh -- the spot on the map where the spiral curled in to an end.

"I knew already that there was some kind of pattern," Challenger said as we got our pipes lit. "I just didn't see it until I looked over the notes I took during last night's activities. The Fibonacci series is one of the most famous equations in mathematics. It defines a sequence of numbers made by adding together the previous two numbers in the sequence, and goes 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 et-cetera. By drawing arcs connecting the opposite corners of squares in the Fibonacci sequence you get the so-called Golden Spiral. Fibonacci spirals abound in nature, from the arrangement of leaves and petals on plants to the curve of the shells in snails and other molluscs."

It must have been obvious to Challenger that I was still somewhat confused.

"Look, take my word for it Malone. These *occurrences*, whatever they are, are following one of nature's most primal sequences. And like all mathematical sequences, once you know the formula, you can predict what will happen next. Or, in our particular case, *where* it will happen next."

He unfolded the map again and pointed at points on it, staring with the one in the Hebrides. "This one is one hundred and forty four. Not miles or feet –

it's a gross of the units used by the thing – each being somewhere around five hundred yards at a guess."

He pointed at another, well to the south towards the port of Campbelltown.

"This one denotes fifty-five. See how they spiral inwards?" He traced the line with a finger. "The intervals between the happenings all follow the same pattern, in ever decreasing units of time. And judging by last night's *visitation* at the bridge, we are now fast approaching the end game. If I am right, then Helensburgh will be the focus of the last four visits, denoting the last four points of the series, 3,2,1 and 1 again. The fifth from the end should be happening sometime before we get off the train," he said casually. "And if my calculations are right, it will be in our immediate proximity, about a mile from the station."

As you can well imagine, I was somewhat perturbed by this, and insisted that we leave the train at the very first opportunity but Challenger would have none of it.

"What kind of a scientist would I be if I walked away from this now, just as it's getting interesting? And another thing," he said. "It's also spiraling *downward* as well as inward. Remember how it was high in the sky in the photograph -- and ten feet above the ground at the footbridge? This time it may even touch down."

"And what will happen then?"

"I have no idea old boy. That's what were going to find out."

If Challenger was worried he certainly didn't show it. And he surprised me further by removing a cotton handkerchief from his pocket and tearing it roughly into strips that he proceeded to ball up into tight wads of cotton. He passed two to me.

"Ear plugs," he said. "I fear we might need them."

He was proved right just minutes later.

It started so innocuously that I scarcely noticed until Challenger pointed out that the sky had taken on a red tinge. I followed his lead in placing the wadded plugs in my ears, and not a moment too soon. The red glow in the sky *pulsed* and the train carriage started to shake and roll - so much so that I feared a derailment. Once again my stomach churned as a deep vibration coursed through me and even through the earplugs I heard a far-off chanting.

But that was the least of our problems. The train shuddered to a complete standstill, so violently that I was almost thrown into Challenger's lap. The window beside him fell out with a huge crash and we fell sideways, almost in slow motion, tumbling and rolling in a bundle of flailing arms and legs as the carriage fell down a small bank to finally come to rest at a forty-five degree angle. Challenger had to almost bodily drag me out what remained of the window and we stood, somewhat unsteady, on the carriage roof to survey the damage.

Whatever was happening, it was clearly not yet over. A roiling red cloud hung overhead, so close that I could have stood on tiptoe and touched the base of it. Indeed Challenger looked as if he would attempt that very thing, but a glance along the length of the tumbled train made me drag his arm down and away. Towards the rear carriage the red cloud hung even lower and smoky tendrils wafted over three men who stood, bemused, amid a pile of wreckage. The smoke drifted over them. Their screams were mercifully short, and when the smoke moved on there was nothing left of them but a mess of blood and steaming *meat*, as if their bodies had been put through a mincing machine. And it was not just the men that were taken. Everything the tendrils touched became disrupted, torn and twisted as if melted and reformed.

"This way," Challenger called as the wispy smoke started to *drift* in our direction.

I did not need telling twice.

We fled along the embankment as fast as we were able.

*

On arriving at the station platform in Helensburgh we found the place in turmoil. A small group of survivors had made it there ahead of us and were already being tended to by station staff. A group of local firemen, still struggling into their gear, passed us going the other way. I started to warn them but Challenger pointed back the way we had come.

"Let them go lad," he shouted. "The danger has passed. For now."

I saw that he was right. The train was a smoking, ruined wreck in the distance, but the red cloud had lifted away and was already dissipating. I removed the earplugs. My head rang, but there was none of the nausea I had felt the night before, and the headache was rapidly fading.

I stopped, thinking of helping with the cleanup, but Challenger dragged me away.

"Come man. We must find the focal point, before it is too late for all of us."

I knew better than to ask him exactly how we might go about accomplishing the task, and followed him down into the town. He muttered to himself all the way, and I only caught fragments, but it was obvious that he was formulating a theory about the strange occurrences that so afflicted us. There was mention of *spectral shifting*, and *interdimensional vibrational entities*, and some discourse on the nature of reality and the vastness of space, but I am afraid it was all a jumble to me, my mind still reeling from the tumbling chaos of the train crash. Indeed I was so befuddled that I walked into Challenger's broad back when he stopped suddenly in front of me.

I saw why when I looked up past him. The sky ahead had taken on the now familiar red glow, and the sound of far off chanting filled the air. My first instinct was to flee in the opposite direction, back towards the train wreck on the grounds that lightning wouldn't strike twice in the same place, but Challenger had other ideas. He studied the cloud for some seconds, marking its path and its rapid descent towards the town center some four hundred yards west of our position. He too looked back the way we had come, then returned his attention to the cloud. He nodded, as if coming to a conclusion, and strode off at pace in a northerly direction.

We walked up a side street lined with neat little cottages that seemed remarkably calm and quiet after the earlier noise and chaos.

"What are we looking for?" I asked.

"I'll know it when I see it," Challenger replied. "But someone has *called* this thing here. And the call has been answered."

The far-off chanting got louder, and faint screams could be heard rising to join it.

"It has made land," Challenger said grimly. "Hurry. Time is getting short."

Just as I was thinking once again of making a run for it, Challenger spotted something off to our right. A tall metal pole, like the mast of a yacht but festooned with a mish-mash web of wire, cable and valves, stood proud above a small stand of pine trees. Even over the sound of far off chanting

and the mercifully weak screams from the town center the contraption gave off an audible *hum* that set my teeth on edge.

Challenger immediately headed for the spot. A tangle of cables led from the pole to a long shed in the back garden of a small cottage set away from the main road. Knocking on the door of the cottage produced no result, but as soon as we approached the shed the door opened. A small wiry man greeted us wearing *pince-nez* glasses, a tweed suit, and the air of someone too busy to be disturbed.

"The name's Logie Baird," he said. "And if you're selling something, I'm not interested."

He had a broad Scots accent that I found difficult to understand, such was the speed with which he spoke, but Challenger seemed to have no such problems.

"Don't tell me," he said. "You're coming to the end of an experiment, the result of which will change the world."

Baird looked up, as if seeing us for the first time.

"Challenger isn't it? I attended your lectures on the electromagnetic field of the conger eel and its use in navigation. Fascinating stuff. But it was a deeply flawed analysis. Let me tell you. . . "

Challenger pushed the small man aside and made for the interior of the shed.

"We've no time for that. Where's this experiment?"

Baird unwisely tried to pull Challenger back.

"You can't just. . . "

Challenger turned, his face contorted in rage, and lifted Baird off his feet as if he weighed no more than a doll. He carried the small man out onto the garden and turned him to face where the red cloud roiled in the sky. Forked lightning *crackled* from it on cue.

"Descending Fibonacci sequences, messages beamed off the magnetosphere and calling down destruction on a grand scale," Challenger shouted. "Any of this ringing any bells?"

Baird kicked and struggled but Challenger had him held tight. He went quiet as a lightning bolt *crashed* to ground nearby and the red cloud started to drift, slowly at first, then with more purpose in our direction.

Baird struggled to speak until Challenger relaxed his grip, but only slightly.

"I will admit I am working on a system that forms images from reflected radio waves and can transmit them across large distances. The Fibonnacci series is the final test. I shall call it *Photovision*." He almost smiled but another *shake* from Challenger put paid to that. "I know nothing of destruction though – I merely sent out some messages. . . "

"Aye," Challenger replied. "And something *merely* responded in kind. Quick man. . . can you reverse the sequence?"

"Certainly. I have it encoded in a spring-loaded coil. Rather ingenious actually, I think you'll like it. It. . . "

Challenger shook him again,

"Can it be done!" he bellowed.

"Yes. It'll take five minutes."

Challenger looked at the glowering sky. It was already several shades deeper red.

"Better make it three," he said, and pushed Baird through into the laboratory.

*

Given the time I could have spent many happy hours in Baird's laboratory. It was obvious he was trying out several different inventions at any one time. There was a particularly strange pair of shoes with pneumatic soles; a razor blade that looked to be made of glass, and a bench piled high with many pairs of long socks that could be internally heated through a cunning weave of copper wires attached to a dynamo.

The lab proper was crammed with chugging generators, sputtering valves and arcing electricity, and Logie Baird darted around excitedly among the equipment with the air of a giddy schoolgirl. A flat white screen stood at the rear of the laboratory, with a contraption mostly made of spinning disks and copper wire projecting a spluttering light onto it. Baird pulled a switch. . . and a flickering image came slowly into focus. It was immediately recognizable – a crude line drawing, of a teardrop, just about to start its dribble down a window.

I was still thinking about the implications when I realized that the white screen had taken on a distinct pinkish glow. I turned to see Challenger looking up through a skylight window to where red clouds gathered angrily

above us. Another lightning bolt crashed, too close for comfort and the small laboratory shook and rattled. Challenger was putting in his earplugs even as he bellowed at Baird.

"Reverse the bloody sequence. There is no time left."

I followed Challenger's lead with the earplugs, and got them in place just as the dissonant chanting returned, louder than we had yet heard it. My stomach churned as the whole lab pounded in time, as if we were caught inside a kettledrum. Through the skylight I saw wispy tendrils of smoke, then the whole view was obscured as a red teardrop, in shape a perfect replica of the image projected on the screen, *fell* on the laboratory.

Baird was busy fiddling with a piece of equipment on the far side of the lab – so intent on his work that he did not notice when a piece of the roof was *melted* away, dissolving as fast as a piece of ice dropped in boiling water. Smoky tendrils wafted down towards the inventor.

I heard, as if from a distance, a loud bellow of defiance and watched dumbfounded as Challenger swept a large table free of the mechanisms that festooned it and, carrying the table above his head, moved to stand over Baird. I saw his intent immediately, and ran over to hold one end of the table, using it like an umbrella to protect us all from the falling tendrils.

"Hurry man," Challenger shouted as Baird fumbled with the mechanism below us. The table started to feel lighter in my hands and I smelled smoke. I looked up to see that the wood was melting and flowing, like wax in a hot flame.

"I've got it," Baird shouted. A second later Challenger pulled us away just as a fresh clutch of tendrils wafted in our direction. The chanting rose to a crescendo that threatened to shake the bones from my flesh. We crawled ignominiously under a trestle as the tendrils snaked around us.

"Did you reverse the sequence?" Challenger shouted.

Baird had fresh blood at his ears and nostrils, and his eyes fluttered alarmingly, but he was aware enough to reply.

"It's done. But if the transmitter goes, then it will never get sent."

I do believe that Challenger might have put his own body between the tendrils and that transmitter if it was required, but our luck changed for the better at that point. Just as I feared the very structure of the shed itself might

be completely melted the chanting diminished to an almost acceptable level, the red haze started to lift, and the smoky tendrils wafted up and away.

I saw a patch of blue sky above, and remembered to breathe.

*

And there you have it – as much of the tale as my understanding can tell. Challenger tried to fill in some blanks for me later that evening.

We had returned to Glasgow, and were once more at a quiet table in the corner, nursing our second flagon of ale. The events in the laboratory were already taking on a dreamlike quality in my memory. I barely remembered the rush back to the train wreckage to clear the railway track of rescuers before the imminent return of the *entity,* the hurried explanations to the authorities – most of which we left to Baird – and the slow bus journey back through Glasgow to our hotel. It was only after I had a beer inside me that I started to be able to look at the day dispassionately.

"What in blazes was it Challenger?"

He spent a while staring into his beer, then dipped a finger in it, and let a drop fall back into the glass.

"Baird unwittingly caused ripples in the space-time continuum when he bounced those messages off the magnetic field of the planet," he said, leaving me none the wiser. "And something took note and followed them back to their source. We may never know what it was exactly, but I believe there are *entities* of magnetic energy out there. It maybe that they are just cruising the ether. Until they meet a ripple."

He made a swirling motion with his finger pointed downward over the beer, dipping ever closer to the surface.

"Luckily for us, we stopped it in time."

He reversed the *spin* and drew his finger away. That was when I *understood.* I could finally see it in my mind's eye – the teardrop hanging over Helensburgh starting to spiral away and upwards, slowly at first then ever faster out into the black depths of space and away into an unimaginable distance.

"I have asked Baird to keep the transmitter running for some months," he said. "That should be ample time for the planetary orbit to take us far enough apart to avoid further interference."

Challenger drained his beer in one smooth motion. The same child as the previous night arrived at that moment at the barroom door.

"The singing's back. Down at the bridge again."

Challenger stood. I thought he might want to have another look at the *entity,* but instead he went to the bar and returned with two more beers.

"It is merely the return leg of the spiral. As long as the crowd stays back the danger is passed – for now," he said. "But Baird is only a pioneer. Others will follow. We are announcing our presence into the ether. And who knows what might reply?"

He took a long swig of his beer, and looked as pensive as I have ever seen him.

"Watch the skies, Malone. Keep watching the skies."

The Doom That Came To Dunfield

"Get it done, or don't come back."

That's what they said at the ministry just before they packed us off to Southampton to catch the boat to Newfoundland. What they didn't tell us was that the crossing would be foul, the food would be worse, and the weather once we got to our destination would be sub-arctic, and getting colder by the day. I stood on deck, a gale-force wind trying to blow me back to Blighty, watching a small group of frozen scientists and completely disgruntled sailors tried to put together a patchwork contraption of chrome, wire and electrical components, all of which were a complete mystery to me.

At least before the war they'd been sending me to warm, dry factories in the West Country. But the Nazis changed everything; Hitler's thirst for a technological advantage meant that the Germans threw vast amounts of money into research. And it wasn't until the fighting was over and the dust settled that Britain realized we were no longer rich enough to keep up.

That's when I got recruited to the think tank.

"Come up with smart stuff nobody else has thought of yet."

Not much of a brief, but it had been enough for us to be going on with. Since the late Forties we'd got by with the occasional report, a couple of not-too-disastrous demonstrations, and the promise of results at an unspecified later date. It had been an easy, if uneventful, life, and I was already looking forward to early retirement and some gentle rounds of golf.

Everything changed with the new decade. A new broom swept Whitehall, one that almost swept us away with the rest of the dross. Professor Muir arrived at the opportune moment and became both savior and Satan. He had a reputation to maintain – iconoclastic, eccentric and abrasive, but also undoubtedly brilliant. He'd been the man responsible for jamming the buzz bombs' guidance systems, for finding an antidote to a plague the populace never even got to hear of, and for finding a way to clog enemy harbors with rampant seaweed. In another country he might be feted and honored; here he'd insulted too many people in power, rode roughshod over too many regulations. They gave him the think tank in the hope that he'd run us quickly into oblivion.

Instead, he once again did something remarkable.

My own specialty is in Human Biology, with Chemistry second and applied Mathematics a distant – very distant – third. Muir's explanation that we sat through back at the Ministry had gone completely over my head. The only bit I understood was his opening, and closing, question.

What if we could make a battleship invisible?

The Professor did just enough to persuade the Ministry that a field trial was at least a possibility. They in turn insisted on somewhere away from prying eyes. With the help of our friends the Canadians we started to plan the trip to Newfoundland, although I will admit that I did canvass hard for an alternative spot in a quiet bay in the Mediterranean.

But Newfoundland in what passed for spring in these parts it was to be, and after several months of frantic preparation Muir finally announced he was ready. I still had little clue as to how he proposed to do it, or even whether it was at all possible, for the final experiments had been undertaken above my clearance level. For a while I even held out hope that Muir meant to take the trip without me altogether, but that was dashed three days before departure.

"I need you, Duncan," he said, mollifying me somewhat with a large glass of some excellent Scotch. "You keep me on the ground. Besides, a trip like this can never have enough Scotsmen."

We both laughed at that, but there was something in my countryman's eyes I hadn't seen before. It looked like doubt – and possibly more than a trace of fear. Whatever it was, he wouldn't be drawn on the matter, even after we'd made serious inroads into the whisky. All I got from him was a muttered oath about damn stupid researchers.

In the morning I asked around. Dick Roberts, a young lab technician, hadn't been seen for several days, but that was all that was known, all anybody knew. I didn't get to the truth of the matter until much later, and by then, of course, it was far too late.

*

I was thinking about Muir's bottle of Scotch while I stood on the windy deck of the battleship. A dram or two would have been most welcome at that point, but I knew better than to leave my post. I might not be a naval man, but on this trip it was best to obey the chain of command; it was either that or risk a stint in the brig. Captain Squire had taken pains early on to show that he was in charge and would not hesitate to prove it. At some point I knew that he and Muir would have a serious disagreement, but so far they had kept to their separate corners. I only hoped the peace lasted long enough to get the job done.

I was brought out of my reverie by a shout from Muir himself.

"Let them know we're ready," he called out. It was finally the time for my one bit of action in the proceedings. I made the signal to the watchers on the shore some four hundred yards away. Even from here I could see that their tent on the exposed promontory was billowing and blowing in the increasing gale, but I saw their answer clear enough. They too were ready.

I gave Muir the nod, and did the same again in Captain Squire's direction to show that I acknowledged his authority. Muir was not so polite. He stepped forward and, without further ado, threw a lever on his box of tricks.

Nothing of any consequence happened. Something sparked, there was a distinct hum that lasted for maybe three seconds, then all I could hear was more wind, and all I felt was cold rain in my face. I turned away in time to see Captain Squires' smirk before he headed for the relative warmth to be had inside. I lingered just long enough to have a word with the Professor.

Muir did not seem too perturbed by the outcome.

"A blown valve," he said. "I forgot to factor in the effect of the degaussing panels. These things happen. Give me an hour and we'll try again."

But the hour turned into two, then three, and Muir's temper frayed with the dimming of the day. By the time it came round to sunset he had to give up hope of getting anything done that day.

"It's the blasted rain," he said as we made our way to the Captain's quarters for pre-dinner drinks. "It's causing too many shorts."

Squires heard that as we entered.

"Perhaps some kind of umbrella might be in order?" he said, and laughed long and loud, which only caused Muir's brows to furrow deeper and his mood to darken further. By the time we got round to eating it was obvious an explosion was imminent.

Mr. Jones, the Purser, tried to lighten the mood by telling a long, involved tale of shore leave, a brothel, and a Spanish prostitute who was more man than many of the sailors, but it fell mostly on deaf ears. The Captain seemed determined to rub Muir's nose in what he deemed already to be a failure.

"You do know that the Yanks tried this already?" Squires said, loud enough for all to hear. "Back in '43, with the *Etheridge* I believe. A bloody disaster all around, or so I'm told. At least you managed to avoid that."

At first Muir tried to control himself.

"I'm not about to recreate that mistake," he said. "I have carefully modulated all of the sub-stream harmonics and ensured that the frequency shifts are calibrated. I. . . "

Squires interrupted him again by laughing loudly.

"There's your typical scientist, gentlemen. Never uses one big word when two will do. It's no wonder that everything they touch turns to dust."

"And there's your typical military man, gentlemen," Muir replied, so loud that everyone else fell silent. "So full of his own self importance that he cannot recognize the worthiness of anything but his own kind."

The Professor started warming to his topic. I put a hand on his arm, hoping to mollify him somewhat, but he was too far gone for that.

"Without science you wouldn't have this fine vessel," he bellowed. "Without science you wouldn't have these electric lights." He reached up and set the overhead lamp swinging, sending alternating bands of shadow and light over all the faces that were gaping at his performance. Muir lifted up his whisky tumbler. "And without science you wouldn't even have the glass to hold this dishwater you have the nerve to call whisky."

He threw the glass against the wall. I winced, anticipating the shatter. It didn't come. The tumbler hit the wall. . . and kept going, disappearing from view and leaving a series of ripples behind in the solid steel, ripples that almost immediately hardened in place.

"Is it working?" the Purser asked.

"It seems something is," Muir replied deadpan. "Maybe you should send a scientist to check?"

*

We made our way swiftly up on deck to find that the ship was becalmed in dense fog, gathered around us so thickly that I could only just make out the bow to my left and the gun turrets to my right although they were mere yards away.

Muir headed towards the experiment. He hadn't quite reached it when the first scream pierced the night. I turned towards the sound, and was just in time to see a sailor sink into the deck, as if he'd fallen into a pool of water. He waved his arms, and what had been metal *splashed*, slowly, as if thick and viscous. The man opened his mouth to scream again. The liquid flowed and spilled down his gullet. Then, as quickly as it had liquefied, it hardened, and became solid metal once more. The sailor was mercifully quite dead by the time I reached him.

"Turn that bloody thing off," I shouted. Muir didn't move. I left the stricken sailor, strode across the deck and grabbed the Professor's arm, turning him

around until we stood nose to nose. "Turn it off," I yelled into his face.

He replied, remarkably calmly.

"That's a problem, Duncan. It isn't switched on."

I saw immediately that he had told the truth; the contraption of wires, valves and coils sat in the middle of the deck, inert and silent.

"So what the blazes is happening?"

Muir shook his head.

"I don't rightly know. Maybe some residual effect from when we started it up earlier; maybe something got started that would have been stopped if we kept going. Maybe. . . "

"There's a few too many maybes there for my liking," I replied.

He nodded.

"Mine too. But I need more information before I can hypothesize."

A shot rang out from the stern, bringing all speculation to an abrupt end as more screams filled the sudden silence that followed.

*

When I reached the stern I was at first unsure exactly what was happening, for the fog was, if anything, even thicker here; so thick that it looked almost solid. That thought proved rather too close to reality as a waft of wind blew a more dense area over the top of three sailors nearby. They reacted as if hit by a wall of searing flame. Flesh melted and sloughed off their bones in oily sheets even as their screams tore at my ears. Mercifully it was all over almost before I had time to move. Another breeze wafted past, the denser fog moved away to starboard, and we were left on a quiet deck with only the brutalized bodies to remind us of what had just happened.

Muir reacted the fastest of us.

"Get below. Get below now. It could happen again at any moment."

We didn't all make it. Captain Squires had momentarily lost his air of command, and looked more like a startled accountant than a naval officer; he stood, rooted to the spot, staring at the bloody smears that were all that was left of the crewmen. Muir and I had to manhandle him away forcibly, and when he finally decided to move he did so with the blank, almost lifeless, stare of a man in deep shock. We got as far as the main storm door leading below just as thicker fog wafted over the bulwarks. Metal warped,

buckled and melted. A young lieutenant – to this day I have never even learned his name – leapt between us and the approaching fog.

"Get the Captain below," he yelled.

And those were his last words. The fog fell on him, and once again the result was the same as before. Muir didn't let me wait to see the man's final end. He dragged the Captain to the opening, I dove in after them, and the Professor heaved the storm door shut behind us with an almighty *clang*. The metal warped, rippled, then hardened again with a series of creaks and moans that sounded almost human. The fog had moved off again.

I remembered to breathe. We were still alive.

But for how long?

*

It took a lot of shouting, ordering and threats of a spell in the brig, but eventually the remaining officers got the crew together in the main mess room. As a man they looked to the Captain, expecting orders, reassurance. . . . leadership. I saw in their eyes the fear that threatened to grip me so tight I'd no longer function. All of us eyed the walls and ceiling, ready for flight at the slightest hint of *softness*. We jumped at even the most quiet of sounds and tried not to think of what the fog might do to us if we were caught in it.

To start with the Captain was in no better state than the rest of us, but Muir, who seemed made of sterner stuff, took charge of that matter at least. He went to the officer's quarters and returned with three fingers of Scotch in a tumbler, refusing to let the Captain abstain from drinking it.

"Get it inside you, man," he said. "There's a reason it's called the *water of life*."

Twin spots of color appeared at the Captain's cheeks as the liquor hit his stomach and went to work. His eyes cleared and he looked at Muir as if seeing him for the first time.

"What the blazes have you done, man?" he whispered.

"I don't know. Yet," Muir replied. "But leave that part to me. You need to get control of this ship. Your crew need you."

That simple call to duty was what the Captain needed. He stood up straight, his training and experience took over, and he stepped up onto a table to address the men. Muir pulled me aside for a confab, so I missed Squires'

speech, but even from the far corner of the galley I saw that he had the men's attention, and the fear had receded somewhat from their eyes.

We might get out of this yet.

"I hope you have a plan, old man," I said to Muir. "For I'm afraid I haven't a clue."

Muir looked grim.

"Somehow we've managed to alter the very fabric of space," he said. "And I'm not sure there is anything that can be done about it."

"You'd best get your thinking cap on then," I replied. "I don't intend to just hang around to be melted like a wax candle."

My statement was amplified by a shout from one of the crew. It was addressed to the Captain.

"We should take to the lifeboats. Right now."

Both Muir and I saw that the Captain was considering the option. Muir strode over and stood below the officer looking up.

"It's not safe," he said.

Squires laughed bitterly.

"Where is?"

Muir had no answer to that one, but he still had his bluster.

"We have no idea as to the extent of this fog. At least in here we have some kind of protection that the lifeboats would not afford us. The metal in the hull seems sufficient to hold it at bay."

"And what exactly is *it*?" Jones the Purser said, loud enough for all to hear.

Everyone fell silent. That was the single question we all needed to be answered. Muir's reply echoed what he had told me seconds before.

"It's some kind of flux in the fabric of space. We may have inadvertently caused a tear, allowing something from beyond, or between, to slip through to this plane of existence."

"Dinnae talk pish, man," a heavily accented Scots sailor shouted, and that got a nervous laugh from around the room.

"I ain't never heard of a place where they've got fog that bloody eats people," a Cockney voice chimed in.

"Maybe we're in Hell?" another answered, and as quickly as that they were all talking and shouting above each other. The meeting threatened to descend into chaos until Squires bellowed at the top of his voice.

"That's quite enough of that nonsense," he shouted. "This is still a ship of His Majesty's Navy. Let's act like it."

Muir stepped up onto the table alongside the Captain.

"We just need to keep calm," he said. "There's a scientific explanation for this, I'm sure of it."

"Aye?" the Scotsman who'd spoken before shouted back. "Well, you can take your scientific explanation, and shove it up your scientific arse."

Another round of laughter ran around the room, but I didn't join in. Something had caught my attention; at first I thought it was caused by a nervous tic in the corner of my eye, but it was more than that.

Much more.

One of the large extractor units in the ceiling above the main stoves was melting, running like hot wax.

The phenomenon, whatever it was, wasn't just back. It had penetrated the hull and was inside with us.

*

I tried had to remain calm as I walked forward to stand beneath Muir. I kept my voice low, hoping only he and maybe the Captain, would hear.

"We've got trouble," I said. "It's got inside."

Muir nodded and forced a smile, as if I'd just told him a joke. He looked out over the crew.

"Given that the hull seems to be providing us some degree of protection, I suggest we put a much metal as possible between us and the outside? Somewhere further below deck perhaps?"

The Captain nodded.

"We shall make for the engine room," he said. "And give the Professor here time to think out way out of this."

"Bugger that for a lark," the Scots sailor shouted. "I'll no' be cooped up like a rat in a trap. I'm headed for a lifeboat. And if you want to stop me, you'll have to shoot me."

"That can be arranged," the Captain said coolly, and when I looked round at him he had a pistol in his hand, aiming straight at the Scot. "Mutiny is a hanging offence, but we're short of a rope right now."

The big Scot looked around, looking for support from his shipmates.

"We can rush him. He can't shoot us all."

But no one seemed keen to attempt it. Besides, I saw that the *melting* area was growing fast, encroaching further into the room.

"Captain," I said. "We have to go. Now."

He nodded, but never took his eyes off the big Scot.

"Get to the engine room, on the double," he barked. "We'll deal with your impudence once we're safe."

Squires turned and pointed to the door.

"Civilians first," he said, and waved the pistol in such a manner that we knew better than to argue. Muir and I headed to the doorway. We had just reached it when there was an almighty commotion behind us in the mess.

We'd left our retreat too late.

The fog had found its way fully inside, and the crew had now seen it. A melee immediately formed as too many men tried to cram through the narrow door. Muir, the Purser, Squires and myself were the only ones that had made it out before the scrum.

"I will have order," Squire shouted, but fear held the crew in its grip. That, and the sound of screams rising from back inside caused the frantic mob to get even more agitated.

A single scream rang out, so anguished and forlorn that it stunned everyone else into silence for a moment, before the scrambling resumed with even greater intensity. Punches were thrown that would floor an ox, eyes were gouged, heads were stamped on and hair was pulled from its roots as men climbed over their friends and crewmates to try to reach safety. And all the time the screams grew wilder and more piteous behind them.

Men started to make their way out into the corridor, the press of bodies finally forcing us to back away to avoid being crushed ourselves. The metal in the doorway from which the crew was making their escape began to melt and buckle.

"Fall back," Squires shouted. "We'll regroup in the engine room."

It was obvious there was no alternative. We made off at speed down the corridor.

The screams of the dying followed us all the way.

*

We did not make it to the engine room. In fact we only made it ten yards before Muir stopped dead in his tracks ahead of me. I almost ran him over, and Jones the Purser barreled into me too before we all came to a stumbling halt. I immediately saw why the Professor had acted. The whole corridor ahead of us seemed vague and unformed; the walls themselves were only a little more substantial than smoke. The floor rippled and swelled, as if pulled and pushed by tidal forces, the wavelets reaching almost to our toes.

I stepped back, hoping to move out of reach, but felt the weight and press of bodies at our rear.

"Stay back," Muir shouted.

"You don't get to tell me what to do," a voice I recognized replied, and the loud Scots sailor pushed his way past me. I tried to hold him back, but he shrugged me off easily.

"Come on lads, let's take to the boats."

He took another step, his foot hit the deck. . . and kept on going. The big man lost his balance and fell forward, floundering. He shouted an oath, flapped his arms, then he was just *gone*, swallowed up as the deck rippled, then calmed. The metal pinged and creaked as it hardened once more. Something lay at my feet. I bent, and almost retched at the sight. It was a thumb, callused and tough. . . and neatly severed at the base, as if sliced by the keenest of blades. A dribble of blood ran from it. It was all that was left to show that the Scot had ever been there.

I'm afraid to say that I almost lost my composure, gripped by the certainty that we were all mere seconds from the same doom. If Muir hadn't taken matters in hand I might have just sat down and waited for my fate. Before I could do anything he took a step forward of his own. I held my breath as his foot touched the deck. Muir planted his foot firmly, putting his weight on it. The deck held, and I remember to breathe; the sense of mist and vagueness in the corridor had passed again.

For now.

"Quickly," Muir said. "I'm starting to get an idea of what's going on here."

We followed him down the corridor. Then, instead of heading down towards the engine room, he made for the storm door that led back out onto deck. He tried to push it open, but the previous damage done to it meant it was badly warped in its fitting. It creaked under his efforts, but did not give.

"Lend me a hand here, Duncan," the Professor said.

"Wouldn't we be safer below?"

He shook his head.

"I'm coming to believe we are not safe anywhere. Now push."

I did as I was bid, and between us we forced the door open. The screech of metal on metal was almost deafening. Then again, so was the silence that fell as we got the door fully opened and looked outside.

The whole length of the deck looked like a candle that had been left in bright sunlight, having gone slightly soft then hardened again. The metal rose and fell in hard ripples, as if a wave had washed over it then gone firm.

"Look Duncan. Do you see?" Muir whispered at my ear.

At first all I could see was fog, curling and roiling everywhere. I had no wish to step out into it.

"Do you see," Muir said, more insistent this time. "It hasn't been affected at all."

He was speaking about the coils and chrome of the experiment. The machinery still sat on a seeming unaffected part of deck, and there was no sign that any of it had been melted or malformed in any way.

"Get the crew over there," Muir said to Squires. "Get everybody in a circle around it. It may be our only hope."

If the Captain took any slight from being given what amounted to an order, he didn't have time to complain. A wail of terror from back in the corridor was the signal of another appearance of the phenomenon. I could not see through the throng of bodies, but the sound froze the blood in my veins, and the memory of that severed thumb reminded me all too well of what must be happening.

Muir didn't wait. He stepped out onto deck.

"Come on, Duncan. We must take the chance. It may be our only hope."

A fresh scream from the corridor made my mind up for me. I followed Muir out the door, expecting at any second for my foot to disappear into melted

metal, or for a thicker fog to fall on me and start to burn. But for those few seconds it took to cross the deck, luck was finally on our side and we reached the experiment with no further mishap. I helped Squires and the Purser arrange the crew around the contraption, and was dismayed to see that less than half of the men who had gathered in the mess room had made it out to the relative safety of where we now stood.

"Maybe they have found another route," Jones the Purser said, hopefully, but I saw the look that passed between Squires and Muir.

Those of us who had made it out on to the deck were the only survivors.

*

The fog swirled and rolled thickly around us, and we drew back into a tighter circle around Muir's contraption. The deck beyond the circle buckled, flowed and hardened where the fog passed. But none of us were in the least affected, and I started to hope that the worst might be over, that Muir had indeed found a way to keep us safe, for a time at least.

I even relaxed enough to remember the pack of cigarettes in my pocket, and for a few seconds I was the most popular man on deck as I passed smokes around. Normally Muir would have joined me, but he was now completely intent on the contraption. I went over and stood at his side.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

He didn't reply at first, then took my smoke from me, took a lung-full and handed it back.

"I'm considering our next move," he said. "We might have to switch it on again."

I hadn't heard Squires approach, but when he spoke he was at my shoulder.

"After what it's done already? I can't allowed that."

"We may not have a choice," Muir said. "Or do you intend to stand here for eternity waiting for conditions to change in our favor?"

"This fog will clear," Squires said. "Fog always does, eventually."

"Not this one," Muir said softly. "I have been considering its behavior. The phenomena associated with it have been appearing in a loose spiral pattern. . . and we are currently at the center of that spiral.

I mapped out the ship and the deaths so far, in my mind. Muir was right in his thinking, but I didn't see how it helped. He however, had thought it

through more than I.

"I believe I might be able to predict where the soft spots occur; and I also believe that if I switch this machine on, we can effectively freeze the fog in place around us allowing us a clear passage to the lifeboats."

I saw hope grow in the Captain's face.

"I thought the boats were a bad idea?" he said.

Muir looked grim.

"And well they might be. But I for one will not stand around here just waiting to die."

Squires laughed with little humor.

"We may make a naval man out of you yet, Professor. Do what needs to be done. I'll prepare the men."

*

I spent the next twenty minutes alternately watching Muir fiddle with wiring and dials and eyeing the swirling fog, trying to ascertain any pattern in its movements. Squires had passed orders to be ready to make for the boats on his order. The crewmen around us grew increasingly restless, especially as the deck just outside our protected circle was now contorted and buckled into a nightmare landscape of peaks and troughs, spires and deep dark holes.

"Nearly done," Muir said when I asked. At almost the same instant the deck bucked beneath us. Two crewmen fell, off-balance, and tumbled away from the protected area. The fog fell on them as if it was a predator that had been waiting for the opportune moment to strike, and once again we were forced to watch as death melted through the sailors.

"It's penetrated the hull below water level," Squires said. "Whatever you're going to do, best do it now. We're sinking."

"On my mark, run," Muir said. He reached for a lever and pulled it down. The air filled with a resonant hum. The fog swirled up and away from where it had descended on the two men and danced around where we stood.

"It's working," Squires shouted.

Muir still looked grim. "Well, it's doing something at least." He turned a dial. The hum grew to a drone and raised in pitch, ever higher, to a high

whine that grated at the ears. The fog stopped swirling and hung, like a blanket, just above our heads.

"Run," Muir shouted.

None of us needed a second telling. We ran, picking our way though the ruin of the deck, trying to not look at the fog just above us.

The whine from Muir's contraption went up another notch, pressure bringing a sharp ache in my ears. The deck bucked beneath us again and the ship listed sharply to starboard. One man fell into a hole and went, screaming, down into a black deep that soon went silent. Another tumbled head-first into a metal spire that impaled him through the chest, stopping his heart in an instant.

The rest of us didn't stop. We rushed headlong for the port side hoping against hope that the boats there were still seaworthy. The deck was now at such a slope that it became almost a matter of climbing to reach the hanging lifeboats, but it was with enormous relief that we found two boats still there, showing no signs of having been affected by the ravages of the fog. We clambered into them as best as we were able; luckily there was no repeat of the scrum that had occurred in the mess room.

Muir and Squires were last aboard. Squires gave the order, and my stomach leapt to my throat as we fell through mist to land with a bone-crashing splash in the sea.

We had only just righted ourselves when the ship above us listed sharply again, the prow rising as the rear sank. The whine from Muir's contraption cut off, as if someone had pulled a plug. The static fog once again started to seethe and roil in the air above the sinking vessel. And it was now spreading, sending out tendrils across the deck. . . and down the sides of the hull.

"Row you buggers," Muir shouted. "Row like your lives depended on it."

The crew took to the oars. The other boat got the message, and they too began to row, but the short delay cost them dear. A thicker patch of fog fell on the rear end of their boat even as they turned and began to move away. I closed my eyes, unwilling to see what was impossible to prevent. Seconds later the screaming started, but it was mercifully short. When I opened my eyes there was nothing to see but debris in the water. . . and a tendril of fog, almost luminescent, stretching ever closer to our own lifeboat.

The rowers could see it all too clearly. Our doom was coming straight for us. Beyond that, the ship was sinking fast, the prow raised high in the air, the fog curling and writhing, buckling the hull and tearing the vessel apart even as it went under hissing and groaning like a dying beast.

"Row," Muir shouted. The men put their backs into it, but the fog crept ever closer. Muir came and pulled me aside so he could be the one standing at the stern.

"If it wants anyone else, let it take me," he said.

The sinking ship gave out one last creaking wail, then with a hiss of steam it went under. The fog swirled and fomented above the spot. The tendrils retracted, falling back into a globular cloud that descended and sank with the ship, a last glimpse of luminescence showing in the night for several seconds before descending into the depths, until it was finally too dim to see.

We drifted in a clear, calm bay under a blanket of cold night stars.

*

Later, much later, there were recriminations and inquiries, funerals and wakes. But the one thing I will forever remember, the thing that still wakes me in a cold sweat, was the conversation between Muir and Squires even as the lifeboat was rowed into the small harbor in Dunfield.

"I've failed," Muir said. "I got all those men killed."

Squires looked pensive.

"I'm not sure the brass will see it that way, old chap," he said, patting Muir on the back. "You didn't give us a means of defending our ships, that's true." He paused, and looked back out to sea, as if trying to mark the spot in his mind where the ship went down. "But it seems to me that you've developed a mighty efficient weapon."

Home From the Sea

"The Irishman's in trouble."

It was no night to be out on the water, but it was an unwritten law in Trinity. If one of us is in trouble, we all are. I drank down the shot of rum I had but left the ale where it sat. The sea was going to be rough enough as it was without having sour beer rolling in my guts as well. I was in a crowd of about a score that headed out to the dock to peer through the wind and spray.

"How far out?" someone asked.

"Just past the narrows. Floundering bad and holed on the port side," came the answer. "We'll need four boats at least."

The long rowboats normally took eight men each, but we had to leave room for bringing the Irishman and his crew back with us if need be. We set out, five boats with four of us in each, rowing hard into a headwind and swell that threatened to send us near as far back as forward with every stroke.

It wasn't the first time I'd been out in such conditions, but it was a first attempt to rescue a big whaler such as *The Dubliner*. I knew they'd been out for three weeks, and guessed they might even have a catch aboard. Their weight, the weather, and the sheer number of crew we were going to have to shift were large in my mind as I heaved on my oar, trying to ignore the increasing pain and tiredness that I knew was only the start of the evening's trials.

By the time we reached the narrows — the outlet from the relative calm of the harbor into the rougher seas of the larger bay beyond — we were all near spent, and matters weren't helped much when the first boat out got

caught in heavy swell and tipped over. They were too far away for us to help, but I saw clear enough that all four men made it to higher ground ashore, although their boat was smashed into so much kindling against the rocks below them.

The men clambered up to the point and waved that they were safe. I knew they were soaked to the skin, and had a long wet walk ahead of them to get back to the warmth of a tavern. But I couldn't waste time worrying on their part, as we too had to fight the rising swell and a crosswind that threatened to send us to the same fate.

I was so busy concentrating on keeping us upright and moving forward that I was nearly thrown from my seat as the prow hit something, hard. I turned to yell an oath at Roberts at the bow. . . and looked up to see the massive bulk of *The Dubliner* loom over us.

*

I helped Roberts and Gallagher tie us up, and we got the other three boats alongside so that we were all arranged in a line along the whaler's keel on the starboard side, protected from the wind. It was around then I started to worry. I would have expected someone topside to have at least acknowledged our presence. Instead all we could hear was the whistling wind and the crash of waves.

"Ahoy aboard," Roberts called out. He had a bellow like a foghorn and if there were anyone aboard they'd surely hear him. But we got no answer. I saw the same fear in Gallagher's eyes that I felt. Nothing good had happened here. And I wasn't at all sure that any good was going to come of us investigating further.

But as I said already; if one is in trouble, we all are. When Roberts started to clamber out the rowboat to head up onto *The Dubliner*, I was second in line behind him, with Gallagher at my heels.

As I climbed I steeled myself for the sights to come; I'd seen plenty of dead men smashed to no more than broken puppets by storms, and I expected that more of the same awaited us on deck.

I climbed over the gunwales and stood beside Roberts. The deck lay empty save for the large whale carcass on the platform at the stern. My fears of finding corpses were allayed, for the moment, but I had a sinking feeling in my gut as I realized we were going to have to search the vessel.

The deck lurched beneath us as the boat was caught in a larger swell, and for a second I thought we were going to be tumbled back over the side, but the keel righted itself; this time.

As the boat steadied, more men came up out of the rowboats. Roberts waited until there were more than a dozen of us on deck, then organized the search. I went with Gallagher and Roberts himself. We headed for the crew quarters, while others went to search the engine room, the mess and the cargo holds. Four men were put to work trying to get the vessel moving again, the plan being to get her at least through the narrows to quieter waters in the sheltered bay inside.

The first thing that struck me as we went below was the quiet. The big steam engine wasn't running and there was no one at the wheel as we passed. And as we went down, the silence seemed to fall on us like a blanket. Several oil lamps hung overhead at irregular intervals, and they provided a modicum of light, but as they swung in the swell they cast bands of dark shadows along our way, shadows that seemed to cavort and caper, leading us deeper into what I feared would be our own doom.

I'm not afraid to admit that my legs felt like jelly, and every fiber of me just wanted to flee, back to the tavern and the welcoming arms of as much rum as I could get inside of me. But for the presence of Foster and Gallagher, I might even have allowed myself to succumb to the terror. But my fear of ridicule was stronger still, and I followed Roberts as we went deeper into the boat.

The Captain, Irish Frank, wasn't in his cabin. It was empty save for a bottle of rum on the sideboard that shouted at me even as we turned away to the corridor. When we looked in to the next cabin I wished I had listened.

We had found our first corpse.

At first I was not entirely sure what I was seeing. It looked like someone had left a pile of clothing on the floor. Then I saw the blood, a slimy trail of it that led in a six-inch wide strip away from the clothing, across the floor. . . and then up the wall to where it stopped at the open porthole. As I bent for a closer look, it became all too obvious that what was left of a man was still inside the clothing, but it was little more than a sack of skin and bones, as if all the *wet* parts had been somehow sucked out of him. I heard Gallagher gag and spew, but I couldn't take my eyes off the sight. I had no idea what

could do this to a man; I only knew that I did not want to meet the culprit any time soon.

"I know that jacket," Roberts said softly. "It's Edward Malone."

I forced myself to take another look. Roberts was right. It was Ted, or rather what was left of him. A fierce drinker, a born seaman. . . and a man who would fight you as quick as look at you. Anything that could reduce so ferocious a sailor to a pile of rags and leave no sign of a struggle wasn't anything I wanted to meet. I started to back away when Gallagher shouted from out in the corridor.

"There's another one here."

Now that we knew what to look for, we found more remains at every turn. And in each case we found no indication as to the cause of the deaths, only more bloody trails, most of which led from the bodies to outside of the vessel by the most direct route available.

"What the hell happened here?" Gallagher whispered.

Neither Roberts nor I had an answer for him, but we wouldn't have had time in any case. The silence was broken by a scream from above; a yell of pain and suffering that tore at my heart to hear it.

We headed topside at a run.

*

We arrived on deck to a scene of bloody chaos. Men ran and screamed, blood flew, the wind howled and the vessel bucked and rolled beneath us. And all around, beasts slithered, too fast for the eye to follow, only being still where they had affixed themselves to some poor sailor. On first sight I took them for octopus or squid, for they had bunches of sucker-laden tentacles that they used to cling to their prey. These tentacles were attached to a head the size of a man's clenched fist.

But no squid ever had a face like these. The eyes were the worst, black pits that seemed to go all the way down to hell. The pits sat above a mouth of sorts, an elongated tube of muscular tissue that pierced the victim's bodies and started to feed. The moist *sucking* noises reached us even above the howling of the wind, and I do believe that sound was the most terrible aspect of the whole scene.

The beasts seemed to be everywhere, swarming across the deck in fast, fluid motion. Six men had already fallen, and three more feebly tried to

keep the ravenous beasts away from them with little success. Gallagher reacted first of us; he jumped at the nearest beast and tried to drag it off its victim. All he succeeded in doing was tear a fist sized lump of flesh away from the poor man's chest. The creature writhed and squirmed in Gallagher's hands, tentacles quickly circling his wrists and starting to squeeze.

"Get the bastard thing off me," he shouted.

Roberts obliged him, but was more circumspect in his approach. He stepped quickly down below deck and came back with an oil lamp.

"Turn your head man," he said to Gallagher then, without waiting for a complaint, spilled hot oil on the beast's face. The black eyes popped, flesh sloughed away and it fell to the deck. Gallagher stomped on it until it was little more than jelly, just to make sure.

Another man I'm fairly certain in was McGuinness the stoker ran past us with one of the things clamped on his face. He went over the side without a sound and fell away. I ran to the rail to look over.

The sea below seethed, filled with the squirming, writhing tentacles of the beasts. I saw that three men had made a bolt for a rowboat, but they were caught and even now were little more than cold meat; food for scores of the creatures that massed around the corpses, tentacles waving as if excited by the kill.

Almost as if the beasts knew I was watching, half a dozen heads turned, black eyes staring up at me. A high wail, like a gull in the wind, came from six mouth parts, then as one they moved, scrambling up the hull, coming straight for me.

If *The Dubliner* had not lurched in a swell at that precise moment, I believe I would have been taken, for I was so transfixed at the sight of the creatures that I could not move from the spot. But when the deck tilted, Roberts too saw what was coming, and dragged me aside.

"To the stern, man," he shouted. "And pray the lifeboat is there."

We ran, even as the things clambered up over the gunwales and came after us.

Someone fell behind me, but I didn't even stop to look. Gallagher, Roberts and I were the only men still standing by the time we reached the stern. The

sight that met us there made me fear that I was not going to outlive my old mates by very long.

A Sperm whale lay on the platform — the whaler's last catch. And it was now obvious that the dead whale was also the source of the *infection.* Its belly was vastly swollen and distended. I would have blamed a build up of gases after its death, if I could not see the gaping hole in the blubber, and the writhing, seething nest of tentacled beasts all fighting to escape from within. It seemed the whale was little more than a carcass; a carcass filled to bursting point.

It was equally obvious that our path to the stern lifeboat — if there even was a rowboat still there — was blocked by a slithering mass of the things.

"We can get to it from below, come up from under," Roberts said.

The thought of being trapped below decks with the creatures had me once again filled with dread, but I knew that Roberts was right. It might indeed be our only chance of escape. But first, we had to find a safe place to get below, and that in itself was no easy matter.

The things were everywhere; they clambered over the bodies of our fallen mates, sucking and feeding in a most disgusting manner. The sounds and sights assaulted my ears and eyes such that I knew they would be repeated nightly in my dreams for evermore, even if I should survive this ordeal. The vessel rocked alarmingly beneath us, reminding us, as if we needed reminding, of the need for haste.

"We need to get off this boat," Gallagher shouted. Neither Roberts nor I disagreed with him. But the beasts blocked our way in every direction, and some were even now beginning to close. I was considering a dive overboard; swim for it and hope for the best, when Roberts started to kick and stomp at any beast in range. They burst with moist squelches and lay still.

"The heads are their weak spot. We can make it," he said, pointing to his left at the hatch to below decks. "Just keep kicking."

We didn't need to be told twice. The three of us moved quickly across the deck in a series of stomping and dancing steps, leaving a trail of slime and mucus behind us. One of the beasts wrapped three tentacles around my ankle and squeezed, sending a flare of hot pain up the length of my leg. I

brought my heel down hard and the head popped; the tentacles fell limply away. I dived through the hatch after Roberts.

Gallagher was just behind and even as Roberts and I turned to pull the hatch closed he fell through, screaming; one of the beasts had attached itself to his neck. The greedy mouth bored into the soft tissue between his neck and shoulder, and Gallagher's screams got louder.

But to the man's credit, he wasn't ready to lay down and die just yet. He yanked the thing away from him, tearing out a chunk of meat and skin of his own in the process, and threw it away. It hit the wall, fell to the floor with a wet thud, then started scurrying back towards us. Roberts stepped forward and brought his boot down on its head, twice, until finally it lay still.

We stood there, wide eyed, staring at each other as we tried to remember to breathe. There was a single scream from above, quickly lost in the wind, then we heard the scurrying and slithering of the beasts moving overhead.

Suddenly all was silent save for the creaking of the old boat and the distant roar of the storm.

*

At some point in the melee I had quite lost my bearings. I thought we had descended to the area immediately above the engine room, but we were once again in the corridor that led to the crew quarters. And if the layout of the whaler was as I remembered it, there was no easy way to get to our objective in the stern from here.

"Our situation has hardly improved for the better," Gallagher said quietly. He bled heavily from the wound in his shoulder, but waved me away when I tried to help. "I'll have time for doctoring later, if we make it."

I looked to Roberts for guidance. He had bent to study the remains of the thing at our feet.

"What the hell are these things?" Gallagher asked. "I ain't never seen the like afore."

"Ain't never heard of the like either," Roberts replied, standing and wiping slime and mucus on his trousers. "It's some kind of squid, I think, but I'm buggered if I know anything more than that. Besides, what they are isn't important. We need to get to the stern, and fast. This boat is going into the rocks at any minute, and when that happens we're all dead anyway."

I wasn't too keen on being reminded of that fact; I was still feeling happy at just having got below and away from the creatures. I looked down the corridor at the path we would have to take. Even with the presence of oil lamps at intervals, it was too dark to see more than ten yards or so, but my imagination filled in the blanks only too well. I started in that direction, but Roberts had other ideas.

"We could go further down," he said. "The most direct route is through the main hold."

"But we have no idea what might be down there," Gallagher said.

"It can't be any worse that what's above us," Roberts replied. He lifted one of the few functioning oil lamps from its hook on the wall. "And the sooner its done, the quicker we can get off this death trap."

I followed him as he led us to the steps that led down into more darkness, hoping against hope that his last statement was close to the truth.

*

We found Irish Frank at the foot of the steps.

The creatures had got him but not before he'd taken many of them with him. Charred remains lay strewn in a wide circle around the Captain's body. A hole in his chest showed where he had finally succumbed. It hadn't been that long ago either, for the firebrand in his hand was still warm.

"He had the right idea," Roberts said, lifting the brand and getting it lit from the flame in the oil lamp. "We should have thought of it ourselves. See if you can find more of these. We might need them."

I found three long brands just by turning my head; I knew from experience that a supply was often kept near the entrance to the hold in whaling vessels. I passed one to Gallagher, and we lit up from the one in Robert's hand.

Now we had enough light, we were able to see that we hadn't just found Irish Frank; we had found most of his crew. They'd tried to make a stand, here in the hold. It hadn't mattered; the creatures had found them, and to a man, fed on them. They lay, piled on top of each other, or attempting to hide underneath barrels and crates or at the foot of another set of stairs where there had obviously been a fight among themselves in their rush to flee. And everywhere were the bloody trails that showed where the creatures had departed after feeding.

The boat lurched again, threatening to throw us off our feet. In a corner of the hold something *scurried* away.

We were not alone.

I expected Roberts to move, to head for the stern, but he and Gallagher had eyes only for the cargo. I saw that the hold was almost full; the whaler had made a profitable trip. The barrels sloshed as the boat rolled. They were full of oil.

"There's a King's ransom here," Gallagher whispered. "We've got to try to salvage what we can."

Roberts laughed bitterly.

"What we need to salvage is our lives."

Gallagher wasn't convinced, but he followed as we made our way quickly through the hold. There was no repetition of the scurrying sound, but I knew that I had heard it, and I jumped at every shadow, every creak of warping wood as we went forward.

When the attack came it was from two directions. A fresh scurrying alerted me first. I turned towards it, just as the thing launched itself at me, tentacles reaching for my face. I got the brand between us, and hit the head square on. Something hissed, and the air filled with a stench that made me gag; hot spew filling my throat. I was aware of a commotion behind me; Gallagher and Roberts had troubles of their own, but I was too busy to pay attention to them.

The thing came at me again. I could just see that it was burned badly; one of the black eyes had popped and dribbled noxious fluid on the deck even as it threw itself at me again. I poked it, twice, with the brand, and the flames took at the second attempt. The head went first. Tentacles writhed and thrashed in frenzy. It was only stilled when I brought my boot down, hard, squishing the burnt remains underfoot.

I turned back to my crewmates, looking for congratulation. There would be none forthcoming. They had not had my good fortune of hearing the attack coming. There was indeed a second burning beast on the deck at their feet; but it had done its own damage before succumbing. Roberts was still on his feet, but he was white as a sheet, apart from where a wash of blood ran down his chest, a gaping wound at his neck evidence of where the thing had penetrated his jugular.

"I'll be fine," he whispered, then his legs gave way despite Gallagher trying to hold him up. He fell at my feet; dead eyes stared up at me.

Gallagher took one look at the body, let out a wail, and headed forward at a flat run. There were more scurrying sounds in the darker shadows and, deciding discretion was the better part of valor, I too headed forward, as fast as I was able to while still ensuring I was safe from another attack.

*

I got to the stairs that led up to the stern just in time to see Gallagher step up onto deck some twelve feet above me. I flinched, expecting him to be immediately attacked, but all I heard was the whistle of the wind and the roar of water on rocks. The vessel struck something, hard enough to make me lose my footing and drop the brand. It hit the deck, snuffed out, and rolled away into darkness.

Something moved and skittered in the shadows.

I fled up the steps, expecting at any second to be hauled backwards down into the dark. I was quite out of breath when I reached the deck.

Gallagher took no notice of me. He stood, staring, not towards the lifeboat at the stern, but forward. The lights of Trinity twinkled some quarter of a mile distant. By some miracle we had made it unscathed through the narrows and were even now being propelled ever closer to the main harbor.

*

"We can bring her in," Gallagher said. "Salvage the oil. We could be rich men by the morning."

I cannot say I wasn't tempted, if only for a second. Then I saw it in my mind's eye; the taverns and whorehouses overrun by tentacled beasts, burrowing into drunken flesh, feeding on babes and the old alike, taking the town by storm even before it knew what had happened. I knew in that instant I could never allow it.

But I could see by the look in Gallagher's face that he was lost in greed with no thought for the consequences. I did the only thing I could think of. I smacked him in the jaw, twice, as hard as I was able before he saw the punches coming. To my relief he fell, out cold. He was a big lad, but I was able to manhandle him onto the rowboat easily enough.

I left him there, took up his firebrand and, although every fiber of my being was telling me to flee, made my way back down into the hold to do what

needed to be done.

*

It was dark down there. And once again every sound, every shadow, made me jump. But the fear of what might happen to my town was even stronger, and drove me forward. I kicked over the nearest barrel, then another, and two more before one finally obliged me and split open, spilling oil through the hold, a river running between the rest of the barrels.

The skittering sounds got louder, but did not approach any closer, and I actually managed a grim smile as I put brand to oil and the deck blazed in flame.

Once more I fled upward, fire nipping at my heels. A creature threw itself down at me from above but I was in no mood for pleasantries. I caught it by the tentacles, slung it around my head, and tossed it straight down into the flame. It took some layers of skin from my hand as it left, but that was a small price to pay to see it hit the fire and burst in flame.

The first barrel blew as I reached the main deck, the concussion almost blowing me off my feet. The whole vessel shook and lurched sharply to port. I had a bad couple of seconds when I couldn't find the winch for the lifeboat, and I only released it just as a second explosion almost tore the whaler in half. We fell, my stomach in my mouth, hitting the water hard and almost overturning before I was able to get an oar in my hand and start to put some distance between us and the now burning whaler.

Gallagher woke, groggily, and had anger in his eyes as he saw what I had done. That anger quickly turned to terror as the sea between us and the rapidly sinking vessel started to seethe and roil. A mass of tentacles rose up, as if tasting the air, seeking us out. Scores of the creatures had escaped from the sinking ship. . . and they were making straight for us.

*

"Row you bugger," I shouted, and Gallagher thankfully did not argue.

Two more explosions racked the stricken whaler, then a third, huge blast that filled the air with smoke and splinters and ash. When I could see clearly again there was no sign that the boat had ever been there save for a mass of wreckage bobbing on the waters.

But we were far from clear of danger. The tentacled beasts swam faster than we could row, and were now mere yards from overrunning us. I gripped the

oar, meaning to use it as a club, ready to take some of them to hell with me.

And that's when the sound came from out beyond the narrows, a high wail, like the one we had heard from the creatures earlier, but deeper, resonant, like a great church organ being readied for play, high and clear even above the roar of the wind. The swimming beasts stopped in their tracks, their interest in us gone. Scores of mouths opened, the feeding tubes raised high out of the water. As one they too wailed, answering some distant call. The noise from beyond the narrows grew louder, more insistent.

The swimming beasts started to move again, not towards us, but off towards the narrows.

I turned back to get our bearings, intending to head at all speed for the safety of the harbor, so I didn't see what Gallagher saw, but I recognized the shock in his face right enough.

"Oh my God, it's huge," he said.

*

He wouldn't speak of it again, not until later, in the warmth and comfort of the tavern.

"It filled the whole of the narrows," he said.

"What did?" I asked, but I was very much afraid that I already knew the answer.

He replied in a whisper so none but I could hear, chilling me once more to the bone.

"Their mother called them home."

Amoeboid

The trouble started at 6:00pm on a quiet Thursday afternoon, and at first it was so small that it was hardly noticed. The summer of '56 had been a hot one so far, and was showing no signs of relenting, and I had gone in search of some escape from the overpowering sense of being slowly boiled in my tin-roofed office. I tried standing under one of the few trees in the shade while smoking down one of my Capstan's but what little wind there was felt too dry, too hot, and the thought of returning to the oven that enclosed my desk was too much to bear. I took a slow, laborious walk over to the only place I know might give me some respite.

The Rocket Research Group's main laboratory was usually the coolest place in the facility, having the benefit of some new-fangled air conditioning from our American chums. I had sought some solace there just the previous day, so knew a couple of minutes there would rejuvenate me, for a time at least. When I entered I saw that young George Thornton was the only other member of staff present, and his whole attention was on something under his microscope lens.

"What have you got there, lad?" I asked.

"I don't rightly know, Prof," he said. "I was just about to come and fetch you to have a look. It's a sample we got from the high altitude balloon flight, some top layer stratospheric stuff. I know there's not supposed to be anything alive up there, but this sure looks like life to me."

He motioned me over to take a look.

"Just five minutes ago it was only a spore, I took it for a pollen grain at first. But either the heat or from the water on the slide have woken it up, and I've no idea what it is."

I bent over the scope and looked down, it certainly had been a spore at one point, one with a rough, almost hairy outer coat, long fine tendrils that wafted to and fro on the tiny currents caused by the light stage's heat on the fluid under the slide. But now the spore had split, and it had a long swollen finger of protoplasm escaping from the right hand edge at about three o'clock as I looked at it. Even as I watched it swelled, and oozed further across the field of view. It was full of livid colors, greens and blues and gold, and it almost seemed to twinkle in the harsh light. It was escaping from the spore so fast that it filled my field of view completely in a matter of seconds and I had to reduce the magnification twice to keep track of the growth.

"It's certainly making itself at home," I said. "Is there just the one of these spores or are there more?"

George shrugged.

"It came from a scraping I took from the bottom of the sample jar, there was a coating, like a hard crust on the outside of the jar it when we brought the balloon down."

"And where's the jar now?"

George stood and bent under the desk.

"Down here in the refrigerator, I thought it best, what with the heat and all."

He opened the fridge door, and the contents, what was left of them, spilled, or rather, oozed out at his feet. There were Petri dishes, glass sample jars, distilled water bottles and what looked like the remains of a jam sandwich, all partially melted, digested, inside what looked like a clear, almost transparent, gelatinous ooze. More of it was already dripping down onto the wooden floor, sending long fat fingers creeping toward George's toes. I saw with some dismay that door of the fridge itself had also been partially dissolved, whatever this was, it was voracious.

And it was clearly growing.

Suddenly I was thinking of infection and contagion.

"Don't think, just go. Get out," I said to George. "Now. Hit the sprinklers and flush the system, while we still can."

I followed the lad out of the lab and we both hit the sprinkler button at the same time. A wash of dilute hydrochloric acid came from the showerhead in the ceiling, sending a fine spray through the whole room. We watched the gelatinous ooze as pustules bubbled and popped across its surface. It pulled itself into a tighter clump, almost the size of a football, obviously a defensive maneuver, but not enough to save it as the acid fell and, slowly but surely, dissolved it until it was little more than a puddle on the floor by the fridge. A haze rose over the remains, an oily residue that danced in rainbow colors before falling back into the spilled ooze. Beyond the window the laboratory fell quiet.

"That was too close," I said once I was sure it was dead. I turned to George, he looked pale, almost ashen. "What's the matter lad, did you get any of that stuff on you."

"No, Professor," he said. "It's not that, it's just that, when I got the sample jar from the balloon this morning I saw there was more of that crusty stuff on the surface of the balloon itself, a lot more.

The balloon was one of the focal points of our research, our main tool for investigating the realms into which we intended at some point to launch our first test rocket. Anything that might cause a problem for the balloon was going to cause problems, big ones, for the whole unit. George knew that as well as I did, and was out of the door first and beat me to the shed where we kept the kit. He stopped and stood at the door until I approached.

"What do we do if. . . ?" he started, but didn't finish, for neither of us had a ready answer at hand. I stepped past him and opened the door.

This time it was me who had to step back quickly, there was more of the ooze here, much more of it, covering the whole floor of the large storage shed. All that remained of our massive high altitude balloon, so big it normally took six of us to get it out of the shed to prepare it for flight, were a few fragments, already dissolving in a mass of seething protoplasm.

"Fetch some acid, lad," I shouted. The ooze somehow seemed to sense an escape route, and surged toward me, forcing me to slam the door hard on it. I remembered the fridge, and I wondered how long it would be before it melted its way through the wood itself.

George hadn't moved. He was staring at the door. I took him by the shoulders and shook him, hard.

"Acid, Thornton. We need it now."

The lad finally came to his senses.

"How much should I get."

"All of it," I replied, rather too sharply, and then had to stand back. The bottom of the door had gone soft and saggy, threatening to drip. "And best be quick about it. It looks like we don't have much time here."

George left at a run. Other members of our team were, by now, beginning to become aware that something was going on and came out of their huts to investigate. It started to get crowded around the shed door. I sent a couple of the faster lads after George with orders to help him out, but I was beginning to wonder whether they'd be on time, or whether we even had enough acid on the facility to cope with what was clearly a rather large menace.

We could all hear groaning and screeching from inside the shed. The structure lurched heavily to one side, and the roof fell in with a crash, the door falling inward to join it. A mass of ooze slumped over the rubble then seemed to fall in on itself with a moist slither, then disappear from view.

I saw the reason as I stepped gingerly forward, the floor, the roof, the door, the balloon and the slime itself, everything had all fallen through the floor of the shed. I had to step closer still to look down into the resulting hole, and my sense of foreboding got stronger still, there had been a drain in the center of the shed, which was what had collapsed.

Somewhere, far below, I heard a deep, moist gurgling.

Whatever the stuff was, it was now in the sewer system under our base.

*

George and the other two lads returned a minute or two later, wheeling a wonky barrow that had been rather precariously stacked with jars of acid. I had them dump the whole bally lot down the drain in the shed before they caused another accident, but I feared it was far too little, far too late.

I knew we needed to get down there after it, but before I could organize a proper hunt I had to spend minutes I could ill afford bringing the rest of the team up to date with the matter at hand.

"So exactly what is it?" Jennings, our administrator, accountant and all round worrier asked. He liked to be precise and clear on every matter, but I had no answer that would satisfy him, and young George's reply was as good as any I could have managed.

"Clearly it's some kind of space poo," he said. "Shed eating space poo. There, does naming it make it any better, any more understandable?"

After everyone had a laugh at Jennings' expense I was able to start managing the situation. Jennings provided some answers to my many questions. The first, and most important, was as to the extent and nature of our sewage system, I'd never given it a moment's thought but our administrator seemed intimately familiar with it.

"We're on a main county system," he explained when I asked him. "Something my predecessor insisted on after the war when they were building the site. There's a new sewer right under our feet, an eight foot diameter brick channel that feeds directly into a main drain that goes

through Anchester and down the valley before heading down toward Oxford for processing."

I could see the bally stuff in my mind's eye, slithering down there in the dark, heading for town and something to eat.

"Then we'd best get down there and stop this thing before it gets to that main drain," I said. I split the men up into four three-man teams, each with respirators and bottles of acid, and sent them down the valley to take up watching briefs in case our quarry got that far down the sewer.

Young George outdid himself by knocking up, in the five minutes it took me to find a flashlight, a small knapsack affair that, when squeezed under the arm like a bagpipe sac, fed acid down a metal tube to a pistol-grip nozzle that could be fired from my hand. I noted that he had even had time to make one for himself as he and I, with Jennings close behind, went down into the main drain under the shed, picking our way gingerly through the rubble.

*

The first thing I noted was the smell, even through the respirator mask the tang of the acid I'd had dumped down the hole was strong and acrid, threatening to burn at my nose and throat. We had descended right over the spot where the collapse had happened, but there was no sign of the ooze, although there was a distinct trail on the floor of the sewer to mark its passing that seemed to shine and shimmer in the beam from my flashlight. I motioned to the others that they should follow and I headed, at some speed, deeper into the tunnel.

At least the brickwork was new and hadn't crumbled, for a sewer the tunnel was remarkably clean, and I came to almost be thankful for the stink of acid, for it surely masked many other stenches than might have proved rather more noxious. We were able to make good time, a fact that gave me some pause, for if we were making such rapid progress, then it meant that our quarry was moving just as quickly, and possibly even faster.

The first sign that it was still ahead of us came when my light fell on a partially digested rat. The head end still twitched and squealed in pain but from the ribs to where the tail should have been was just a mess of unregulated protoplasm, bubbling and seething, and growing. I had not considered that the ooze would be able to detach portions of goop and, in

effect, multiply more rapidly, and now that I had thought of it, I could think of little else.

The poor beast beside my foot squealed piteously. I squirted acid on it and put it out of its misery with the heel of my boot, but even as I did so I heard more screams, all too human screams, coming up the tunnel from ahead of us.

I didn't wait for the other two, I ran, full pelt toward the hideous noises, the flashlight beam swinging wildly against the walls of the sewer ahead of me.

*

I was too late, far too late. The screaming stopped, leaving only the sound of my footsteps splashing in the puddles in the floor of the sewer and my breathing, loud and heavy inside the respirator. I rounded a long curve, then had to stop, all breath leaving me at the sight that awaited in the tunnel.

The ooze, protoplasm, whatever the hell it was, sat under an open manhole, pulled up into a sphere almost a six feet in diameter, the bulk of it almost filling the tunnel. One of the crews I'd sent to keep watch were embedded inside it, partially melted, skin and bone and clothes in the process of being assimilated into the matrix, three grown men, all already, thankfully, dead as the flesh sloughed from their bones.

I heard young George bring up his lunch in the tunnel behind me. Someone else, Jennings probably, began to weep quietly, but I forced myself to step closer. I raised the pistol grip, squeezed the bag under my arm, and sprayed the ooze with acid.

The result was immediate, it recoiled, as if struck, a wobble travelling all the way through it. As I had seen before, in the laboratory, it pulled itself into a tighter ball, then started to half-slump, half-roll away down the tunnel. The result of that retreat was that the three partially eaten bodies of my friends were unceremoniously deposited in the sewer at my feet, but I had no time for grief, the ooze was already retreating away from me at some speed.

I stepped over the bodies and headed after it, but as fast as I could spray acid, it could retreat faster. I had at least succeeded in slowing its growth, it was half the size it had been as it disappeared at an alarming haste into the darkness beyond the reach of my light.

Even then I might have followed, had I not heard a cry from behind me. I turned to see Jennings shouting up to someone up above the open drain cover. I was torn between pressing my small advantage and my curiosity. Curiosity, and common sense, won in the end, and I returned back up the tunnel to stand under the manhole.

Jennings was talking animatedly to one of the other search crews I'd sent out. I left him to it and went to young George's aid. Despite his obvious distaste and nausea he was intent on checking the three bodies, obviously intent on trying to save them, but it was clear to me that the men were far gone.

"It's all my fault," the lad was saying, over and over again, trying for a pulse on an arm that was barely attached to the molten remains of what had been a shoulder and rib cage. I had to bodily drag him away, and had Jennings tend to him while I caught up with the men above. In truth, there wasn't much to hear, although what there was chilled me to the bone. This was the last manhole before town, and the slime was now surely on its way there.

I almost felt the blood drain from my face. Anchester wasn't big, but it had a population of almost ten thousand. I looked at he bodies at my feet, and tried to picture that scene, multiplied a hundred fold and more. Seconds later I was running, full pelt, down the tunnel. I was vaguely aware of George and Jennings behind me, also running, calling my name, but I had no thought for them.

George had been wring on one thing, it wasn't his fault. They were my men, my responsibility. Any fault was mine and mine alone.

And I was not about to let any more people die due to my negligence.

I came to a junction some five minutes after leaving the open manhole. The new red brick tunnel gave way to a much older sewer, dank and wet, dripping with thick slimy moss and lichen, and ankle deep in black water. Now that I no longer had the tang of acid to keep the smell at bay I noticed the stench, thick, almost chewable. Only the respirator mask prevented me from having to stop, and even then I was almost choking as I headed left, downhill, toward Anchester.

I did not have to go far before I once again heard screams, from above me now, in the streets of the town. George and Jennings caught up with me as I was trying to heave a manhole cover aside to give me access up to the road above. Between the three of us we managed to push the heavy circle of iron

up and out of the way. If I was worried that we might disrupt traffic I needn't have bothered, traffic was more than adequately disturbed already.

I climbed up out of the sewer into a scene of utter chaos.

*

The first thing I saw was an overturned butcher's van, it had been in collision with a horse and cart in the middle of the main street. Two older ladies tended to the butcher, he was bleeding profusely from a head wound and was clearly in a daze. His livelihood, the meat from his van, was strewn all across the road, as was the contents of the cart, old iron, clothing scraps and books by the look of it. The cart driver had got the worst of things, his body lay, already mostly eaten, in the center of a mass of oozing protoplasm. The poor horse lay beside its master. The bulk of it was partially digested. Thankfully the ooze had caught it at the front end first so its death would have been quick at least. But the back legs were still kicking, even as flesh sloughed off its back. I looked away, back to the ooze. The horse's head was already little more than sludge and goop; lumps of tissue and blood were visible in the clear protoplasm, clearly being drawn to a spot in the interior of the oozing mass.

The screaming was coming from two children, too frightened to run, too amazed at the sight in the street to take their eyes off it. By rights I should have done something to comfort them, but the digestive processes of the ooze had caught my gaze. As I said, it was clearly taking its sustenance down toward a central part of its bulk, and if that was the case, I knew that there must be some sense to its structure, some degree of organization.

And something with organization could become disorganized, in the right circumstances.

I watched the poor horse be digested as first George, then Jennings pulled themselves up out of the sewer to stand beside me.

"We need to focus our attack," I said as George raised his pistol to point it at the ooze. "And we need to coordinate it too. Follow my lead."

The ooze was growing visibly, throbbing and swelling as it assimilated the bulk of the horse and the meat from the van. A crowd had gathered in the street, keeping a discreet distance, the townspeople clearly unsure what to make of this new thing in their midst. Some of the more curious of them

were already encroaching perilously close to the protoplasm, and if I did not take charge of matters soon, someone else was going to get hurt, or killed.

"With me, George," I said, and stepped forward. I ignored the closest parts of the ooze and aimed my pistol at the central portion, aiming at the spot where most of the digested matter seemed to be being transported. Blood and pink tissue flowed inward, a grotesque mockery of a circulatory system. I aimed for the central area and squeezed the trigger. George sent a stream of acid at almost exactly at the same spot.

I hoped we would be able to end it there and then as the plasm bubbled and hissed, but I had forgotten how speedy the dashed thing could be. It immediately recoiled away from the acid, and from us, heading off down the cobbled street, scattering the watching crowd in front of it, leaving a trail of bloody slime in its wake. I hosed the slimy remains down with acid, remembering the rat, and how there was life in the ooze, even in the remnants it left behind, then turned my attention to the rapidly departing ooze.

"After it, George, quickly," I called. We can't let it get away." The pair of us, with Jennings close behind, ran in pursuit, leaving the startled townspeople far behind as the chase took us the length of the High Street.

We got close enough on two occasions to send more acid over the bulk of it, but the central portion, the place where a ball of partially digested bloody matter still hung, continued to elude us, and the ooze was capable of moving faster than we could run.

We pursued it through the town, squirting acid at any globs of material it left in its wake, before finally catching up to it on the riverbank near the Rowing Club. It slithered quickly down the jetty and spread out, like a huge cape, across almost the full width of the river. An oily, shimmering glow seemed to rise from the water, even as I squeezed the trigger, over and over again, until the pack was completely empty of acid.

The current flowed past us, and the ooze sank, slowly, out of sight. I raised my gaze from the water and looked downstream.

The city of Oxford lay directly ahead, and the ooze was being taken right to it.

"We're going to need bigger knapsacks," George said.

*

I was kept busy for the rest of that long day, arranging for everywhere, and everything, the ooze might have touched to be washed down with acid and, a much harder task in the end, attempting to impress on the authorities the seriousness of the situation facing us. It didn't help my case that the thing seemed to have gone to ground so to speak, all that afternoon I had teams out looking for signs of it up and down the riverbanks, but to no avail. As evidence I had a butcher with a sore head and a whole lot of bloody, acid scarred, slime, certainly not enough to convince the Ministry to give me any special attention, despite the fact that some of it was the remains of dead members of my team.

"We've got a bally flap on in Gibraltar," the clipped tones on the other end of the phone said. "We don't have the time or the manpower to waste on any blasted jelly from outer space. Please don't be bothering us again unless you've got something that needs our urgent attention. You're a rocket group aren't you? Well just blow the bloody thing up and have an end to it."

Tempting as the idea might be, launching a rocket on the academia in Oxford wasn't really an option. I could only keep a watching brief, prepare as well as I could for any eventuality, and hope that I could control any resultant mayhem without any further loss of life.

At least I had the local constabulary on my side, for two officers had seen what happened on Anchester High Street. One of them, Sergeant Green, was a seasoned veteran and level headed enough that his superiors couldn't ignore his story. By the time night fell I had a team of firemen, the Oxford police force and my own staff at my disposal. George and Jennings had arranged, by hook or by crook, for a delivery of industrial acid to be shipped to us. Instead of water the firemen had access to a tanker of acid and a generator to pressurize it in their hoses, the hoses themselves might not survive for long, but I was hoping that they wouldn't have to.

I sat in the main Police station in Oxford, smoked too many cigarettes and drank far too much strong, sweet tea. I racked my brains, knowing that I must have missed something in my preparations, at the same time feeling ever increasing guilt creep up on me over the death of my friends and companions.

When the inevitable call finally came and we had to move, I was actually glad of the action.

*

It must have been in the sewers, two manholes, both melted and fused as if eaten away, lay on the cobbles, discarded as it oozed, like toothpaste from a too-strongly squeezed tube, up out of the drains, its bulk slowly filling the parking crescent in front of the railway station. Wherever it had been, it had obviously been feeding, it kept coming, and coming, until it lay in a heap almost six feet tall across an area the size of a soccer penalty box. The clear matrix was shot through with red veins, its transport system for taking food back to the central mass. And as I got closer I saw what it had been feeding on, half a dozen cows and several sheep, or what was left of them, hung suspended in the ooze, none of them much more than bags of skin and semi-digested bone. The whole mass of the plasm shimmered in the moonlight, and again I saw the same colors I had seen under the scope, greens and blues and gold hanging in the air above it like a curtain of fine gauze.

The railway's Stationmaster had been the one to call us, and he was clearly flustered, in a situation he did not know how to control or apply to a timetable. He was addressing Sergeant Green, his voice raised almost in a shout.

"What in blazes are you going to do about this then? I can't have this mess on the concourse, the eight ten from Reading will be coming in any minute now, then what am I going to do?"

The Sergeant had the small man taken back into the station but we could all still hear him, promising that he'd be having 'a word with our superiors.'

"Good luck with that," I muttered, with what would be the last bit of levity for a while as the ooze started to creep, not toward the station but toward the main road.

We only just got the fire crew in position in time as the ooze advanced, crawling over a parked car and stripping its paint job as if it was sandpaper. Sergeant Green gave the order and two hoses started to send an arc of acid over the top of the protoplasm, I had already told them to seek out the central digestive mass. The ooze bubbled and hissed, and once again I thought we had it beat, only to be proved wrong.

It surged, I have no other word to describe it, and moved in one smooth motion. We thought we had it contained between the railway station and the tall wall on the other side of the road but the thing flowed up and away and over before we'd scarcely begun to hose it down.

By the time we got round the other side of the wall there was nothing to be seen but a long trail of what looked like partially burned grass across a once-perfect lawn, and some slime draped over the walls and roof of one of the college buildings. It made the old stone shimmer and radiate as if coated in hot oil and in other circumstances might even have been quite beautiful.

*

So begun a long night where we played a dangerous game of hide and seek. The ooze showed up twice more, each time larger than the last, each time arising out of the sewer system, and each time retreating so fast from our acid attack that we were unable to stop it. As dawn approached I realized that the town would be waking up, and with it the chance of many more casualties. I could see no other course of action but to take the fight to where the thing was most comfortable, I was going to have to go down into the main sewer.

The firemen, stout chaps that they were, offered to go down in my place, but I felt the burden of responsibility heavy on my shoulders. I had them show me how to operate the nozzles of their hoses. As I was suiting up into one of their safety suits young George started to do the same beside me.

"It's my fault too, Prof," he said as I made to stop him. "I'm coming, and that's that. If you want to put a note in my jotter later, so be it. But I'm coming."

In truth, I was glad of the company as we went gingerly down one of the main manholes into the sewer under the railway station, the first place we had encountered it earlier in the evening. The two hoses were lowered down to us and we stood there for several minutes as our eyes accustomed to the gloom. I heard the thrum of the generator overhead, the acid was ready and waiting for when we needed it. I only hoped it would be enough.

"Well, here we are then," George said. "What's the plan, Prof?"

"Keep talking, make some noise," I replied, thinking on my feet. "I think it's attracted by sound, our men in the sewer, the butcher's van, the railway station itself, all noise."

"You mean, we're the bait?"

I laughed, the sound echoed around us in the confines of the sewer.

"If you want to put it that way, yes."

"In that case, I've got just the thing."

George then surprised me by starting to sing, loudly and making up in effort what he lacked in musicality.

"I am the Lord High Executioner, a personage of noble rank and title."

It delighted me so much, there in that dark place, that I joined in with all the gusto I could manage.

We had got as far as the second 'I've got a little list' when the light in the tunnel changed, somewhere to our north something shimmered, greens and blues and gold, and it was getting closer. George noticed it, and almost faltered in his singing, but I took up the slack, and belted out another chorus as the protoplasm oozed into view, the bulk of it completely filling the sewer as it came forward, heading straight for us.

George looked over at me and even in the gloom I saw that his eyes had gone wide with fear, but he stood beside me as I hefted the heavy hose at my waist, and he followed suit.

We stopped singing as the tunnel filled with a dancing aurora of color that hissed and buzzed as if in response to our song.

"Ready?" I said.

George nodded, and I twisted the nozzle.

As before the result was immediate. The protoplasm leapt away from us, retreating back in the tunnel. And even as I stepped forward to follow I realized I had indeed forgotten something, the tang of acid and seared protoplasm threatened to choke me. . . and I wasn't wearing a respirator mask.

But the ooze was getting away again, and this might be my last chance to prevent early morning chaos in the city above. I walked forward fast, spraying ahead of me, my rubber boots splashing in acid, slime and bubbling, popping pustules of protoplasm. George came along at my side as we chased the thing along the sewer.

I had to hold my breath as I went as the fumes got too noxious, and I was more than aware that we would run out of length of hose any second, but we were, finally, winning. The ooze stopped retreating and formed into a ball some four feet across, a ball that got smaller and smaller as we washed it in acid, sloughing its surface off, revealing the partially digested material at the center.

I was almost out of breath, and the hose was at its maximum length, but I had enough of both remaining to step forward. I thrust the hose, and my hands along with it, deep in the center of the remaining ooze, and let the acid blow it apart into bubbling drips of slime that gave out one last dancing aurora of color then, finally, fell quiet and dark.

*

They say my burns will heal, although I will always have scars on my hands and feet to forever remind me of the thing that came from the sky. But it is not as if I need much reminding. George is here in the bed beside me in the sanitarium, we are allowed out into the garden for a smoke before bed last thing in the evening, and last night it was a clear, moonless night. We looked up, and there, high above us, the sky was dancing and humming, in greens and blues and gold.

Someday soon, we will go and meet it again.

And this time we will be better prepared for the encounter.

From Between

By the time I arrived at Eillan Eighe I was wet, miserable, and dearly missing my warm apartments back in the college. But Roger had called for me, and although we had not met for several years the bonds between us were still taut, and I could do naught but answer when his telegram arrived.

I regretted it at that point of course, standing in the Western Highlands on a wet mud track in the gathering gloom, with rain beating on my head and cold water seeping into my ten guinea brogues.

But just as I was about to turn and head back for the dry waiting room in the railway station I turned a corner, and the glen opened up ahead of me. And

there, little more than a mile distant, sat the squat cubic keep that was Roger's ancestral home, Eillan Eighe.

Roger himself welcomed me at the door.

"Come in man," he said. He helped me out of my sodden overcoat, and showed me into a hall dominated by a huge fireplace and a roaring log fire.

He sat me down in an armchair and placed a tumbler full of whisky in my hand.

I was so relieved to finally get some heat into my bones that it was several minutes before I realised that my friend was not the man I remembered him to be.

We'd first met before the war, at Oxford. We made a strange pair, him tall and ruddy and full of rude health, and me, short, pale and permanently marked by a childhood pox that had almost claimed me. But we found common interest in the wonders of modern science, and had sat up late into the night on many occasions wondering at the implications of the work of Rutherford, Bohr and Einstein.

Then the war came, and we came to see the dark side of man's invention. Roger was never the same after returning from the Somme. He would not talk of it, but one look into his eyes told me everything I needed to know of the horrors that plagued his dreams.

The rigours of battle not withstanding, he had seemed on his way back to some kind of health when I'd last seen him in our club in Piccadilly in '21.

But no longer.

When I looked over to where he sat by the piano, he seemed less the country gentleman, and more like some gothic aesthete, a romantic poet suffering for his art. He was so pale, so wan that his veins showed blue at hands and forehead, and his hair, once black and vibrant, hung in lank grey strands at the nape of his neck. His eyes looked like two black coals sunk in snow, and his hands trembled as they reached for a whisky glass.

"Dear God man," I said. "Whatever is the matter with you?"

He managed to raise a small smile, and for a second, my old friend was there.

"Bad day at the office old boy. I'm glad you've come. I need you."

I rose and went to him. I took his hand and checked his pulse. It was thin, thready, running like a train.

"You don't need me. You need a doctor."

"Not now," he said. "Not when I'm so close."

"The only thing you're close to is death's door."

He smiled once more, and swallowed a large dose of whisky, which immediately brought some colour to his cheeks.

"Not when the water of life is so readily available."

He moved quickly to the piano, surprising me with his speed.

"I will show you why I asked for you to come."

He started to play. I immediately noticed that his style was clumsy and forced, but the piano was in good tune, and the height of the hall gave the acoustics a resonance and depth that hid a multitude of playing sins. What Roger lacked in style, he more than made up for in vigour, and the room rang as he pounded out a succession of minor chords.

Sweat poured from his brow, and his breath became short and shallow, but still he pounded.

I moved to put a stop to the insanity... just as an answering pounding arose from below.

I felt it first through the soles of my feet, but soon my whole frame shook, vibrating in time with the rhythm. My head swam, and it seemed as if the very walls of the keep melted and ran. The fireplace receded into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing existed save the dark and the pounding beat from below.

Shapes moved in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that capered and whirled as the dance grew ever more frenetic.

I tasted salt water in my mouth, and was buffeted, as if by a strong, surging tide, but as the beat grew ever stronger I cared little. I gave myself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.

I know not how long I wandered, there in the space between. I forgot myself, forgot my friend, in a blackness where only rhythm mattered.

And I do believe I would be there yet if Roger had not come to the end of his endurance.

I snapped out of my reverie at the same moment as Roger, exhausted, slumped over the piano. The rhythm from below died and faded, and the room once more filled back in around me, leaving me weak and disoriented. I only came full back to my senses when Roger slid off the piano stool and fell, insensate, on the stone floor.

I took time to take a long slug from his whisky glass to fortify myself before I bent to lift him. He was out cold, and it took all of my strength to get him into the armchair by the fire. By the time I got him seated upright with a rug around him, he had started to snore gently.

Exhausted, I helped myself to more of the whisky and sat myself in the chair on the other side of the grate. For a while I kept close watch on my friend, but sleep was waiting for me, and I gave myself to it with no small relief.

There were no dreams.

*

Roger woke me early.

There was a sheepish grin on his face as he placed a plate of bacon and eggs on my lap.

"No standing on ceremony old chap," he said. "Just tuck in."

He still looked pale, but not in any imminent danger of keeling over.

"What about last night. . . What...?"

He didn't let me finish.

"Breakfast first, to set you up for the day ahead. I'll explain soon. I promise.

He stoked the fire while I ate. The bacon was burnt and the eggs fried until I could have bounced them on the floor, but I do believe it was the most welcome breakfast of my life.

"Don't you have servants for that?" I mumbled through some soggy toast as he poked at the embers.

Once more he grinned as he stood away from the grate.

"They all left. The piano playing got too much for them," he said, and laughed loudly, so much so that I could almost believe that last night's escape had been no more than the fevered dream of a tired man.

"Now finish that off," he said. "I have something else to show you. . . something that only you can help me with.

I wolfed down the last of the toast and followed him out of the room.

He was more animated this morning, more like the boy I knew at Oxford.

"This place is ancient," he said as he led me through to a scullery that was piled high with unwashed dishes and pots. "The first of my line built it nigh on seven hundred years ago. . . . And there have always been stories told that he built it atop a far older settlement."

He opened a door, revealing a set of steps leading down into what I took to be a cellar.

"I got bored in the summer and decided to do some impromptu archaeology."

He lit a firebrand and led me down a winding staircase which opened out some twenty feet below into a large chamber.

It was immediately obvious that it was man made. The walls were built of large blocks of sandstone. I had visited several Neolithic tombs, in Carnac, in Orkney and on Salisbury Plain. This gave the same sense of age, of a time long past. What I hadn't expected, what was completely different, was the overwhelming feeling that this place was in use. The walls ran damp and there was a salt tang in the air but there was no sign of moss or lichen on the walls - only the damp glistening stone.

Roger moved over to one wall and held the firebrand closer.

"Here," he said. "Here's why I called for you."

The wall was covered in small, tightly packed carvings. At first I thought it might be a language, but it was none that I recognised from my studies, indeed, it bore no resemblance to anything I had ever seen before.

"I can't make head or tail of them," Roger said. "But I believe they hold the secret."

I followed him as he walked, lighting stone after stone covered in the densely packed markings.

"Whatever they are, it'll take weeks just to transcribe them."

Roger smiled again, the red from the torchlight casting a demonic cast to his visage.

"Three months, two weeks and four days. Come, I'll show you."

He bounded back up the stairway, leaving me momentarily alone there in the dark.

"Come on then," he shouted. "You didn't come all this way for nothing did you?

I followed the fading glow of his firebrand up the twists of the staircase, and eventually found Roger back in the hall by the fireplace.

He thrust a thick sheaf of papers at me.

"I've no idea what might be the start or end point," he said as I took them from him and sat in the armchair. He hovered around me like an excited puppy until I was forced to admonish him.

"Roger, give me some time. This will not be easy. If you must do something, fetch my pipe from my overcoat."

He grinned again, and I began to believe that my old friend wasn't so far beneath the surface after all.

*

For the rest of that first day I struggled with the script. When it became apparent that an answer would not be immediately forthcoming, Roger left me alone. I heard him clattering around in the scullery, and then later, I'm sure I heard him singing in the cavern beneath the hall, but for the most part I was engrossed in the puzzle before me.

The figures had been transcribed in Roger's neat, methodical hand and, indeed, for a while I thought they might be a vast mathematical formula, a construct born out of Roger's malaise. But I had seen the carvings for myself. They were obviously from antiquity... And equally obviously baffling.

Night fell, and I was no further forward. Roger fed me with over cooked trout and hard potatoes before once more sitting me in front of the fire. I nursed a large whisky and stared into the flames, trying to clear my head of images of scratches on walls.

I was surprised when Roger started to speak, his voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"We have never talked of the trenches," he said.

"And we do not have to if it pains you," I replied, but he waved me down.

"No. It is germane to why we are here."

He took a long draught from his whisky.

"I dream," he said. "I see them, there in the mud, half-obscured by acrid smoke lit red by the flares; Private Jones, his face melted by a cloud of mustard gas, Corporal MacLean, his guts on the outside, fighting weakly as the rats tear at them, my batman, Donnie, staring at his legs which are lying in the mud clear across the trench."

Tears ran down Roger's cheeks.

"And every night it is the same question. Why?"

"Why did they die?"

"No," Roger said, and sobbed. "Why did I live?"

I could only watch as the grief ate away at my friend. He was quiet for long minutes, but I knew him well enough to know there was more to come.

"I came home, hoping that here at least the memories of a happy childhood might blot out the mud and blood. But still they came, every night."

He rose and poured himself another stiff drink.

"I have tried everything I can to dull my sense...opiates, ether, but mostly this," he said waving the whisky glass at me. "But nothing worked... Until one night, in my frustration, I pounded at the piano.

"And, from below something answered. For however a short time, my dreams fell still."

He downed a whisky that would have floored me, poured another and returned to his seat by the fire.

"The rest you know... I dug, and found the chamber and the carvings."

"But what is it?" I asked. "I can make neither head nor tail of your transcriptions."

Once more he stared into the fire.

"I believe it is a window, a way for us to view worlds beyond those which we inhabit. We know that atoms are composed of mostly free space and vibration. Well, possibly, the vibrations set up in the chamber allow us to alter normal space and time, to travel beyond, or maybe, as I suspect is the case, between.

"But why would you want to?" I said, astonished.

His eyes took on a far away look.

"Because there is a dreamer there whose dreams are stronger than mine, a dreamer oblivious to the petty squabbles of men, dreaming an endless

dream in which I might lose myself."

"But that way lies madness."

"No old friend," he said softly. "That is something with which I am already familiar. Will you help me?"

*

I slept fitfully, my dreams troubled, not by the chamber and its incomprehensible carvings, but by a vast plain where guns roared like great drums in a blood red sky and clouds of death passed over the broken bodies of a million moaning men.

The morning found me back in the armchair by the fire, seeking solace in the comforting normality of my pipe. Roger eschewed breakfast, and came and sat on the piano stool. He lit up a cheroot and soon we were putting up a fug worthy of London on a damp evening in October.

"Did you come to a decision?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Not completely. But I intend to keep working on your puzzle. It has me intrigued."

And that's when I had the epiphany. Frustrated, Roger drummed his fingers on the piano, a martial beat, only a few seconds long. The piano rang in sympathy. . . and the answer came to me, all at once.

"It's not a language. . . it's a musical notation."

Roger merely looked at me in astonishment as I jumped out of my chair and headed for the piano. I spread his transcribed papers over the top.

"Look. These lines, separated into groups corresponding to quavers, minims and crotchets. . . but it's not music as such. . . there is no sense of a scale."

Roger drummed his fingers once more, and again the piano resonated in sympathy.

I moved him off the stool and sat down at the instrument.

"So if it's not music. . . it must be rhythm," I said. "Rhythm and vibration."

I shuffled the papers and placed them on the music stand in front of me.

"How do you know where to start?" Roger said.

"I don't. Let us just see if I am right first."

I picked a solid minor chord, and began striking the keyboard in time with the rhythm transposed on the pages. Almost immediately I felt the sympathetic resonance rise from the chamber beneath.

"It's working," Roger shouted. But I was already lost in a world of pounding chords.

Something was far wrong. I knew it at an intellectual level. But the music controlled me deeper than that, in the hindbrain where the evolutionary equivalent of a gibbering monkey hit a log with a stick and enjoyed the noise. My hands pounded the keyboard, hands clenched into fists. The beat sped up a notch and the walls shook, loose mortar falling from the ceiling.

Just as I felt I could go no further, the beat slowed, mellowed.

As it had the first time, my head swam, and the walls of the keep melted and ran. The fireplace receded into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was again alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness.

A tide took me, a swell that lifted me and transported me, faster than thought, to the green twilight of ocean depths far distant.

I realised I was not alone. We floated mere shadows now, scores. . . nay, tens of scores of us, in that cold silent sea. I was aware that Roger was near, but I had no thought for aught but the rhythm, the dance. Far below us, cyclopean ruins shone dimly in a luminescent haze. Columns and rock faces tumbled in a non-Euclidean geometry that confused the eye and brooked no close inspection. And something deep in those ruins knew we were there.

We dreamed, of vast empty spaces, of giant clouds of gas that engulfed the stars, of blackness where there was nothing but endless dark, endless quiet. And while our slumbering god dreamed, we danced for him, there in the twilight, danced to the rhythm.

We were at peace.

*

I came to lying on the floor beside the piano. The first thing I was aware of was the pain in my hands; my knuckles bloodied and torn. But my own pain was forgotten at the sight of Roger.

He lay in the centre of the room on his back, eyes open, staring at the ceiling, a broad smile on his face.

It is only now, more than fifteen years later, that I can bring myself to write about these events. In all that time Roger has never awakened. He is alive, but no longer seeing, borne away, somewhere where the green twilight flickers and the slumbering god dreams.

He is at peace.

And now, as the war drums of Europe beat once again in a quickening rhythm, I dearly wish I had gone with him.

#Dreaming

@greatcthulhu Feeling sleepy LOL! #ryleh

Darren was amused to see the Dreaming God turn up in his Twitter feed that January morning, amused enough to *follow* whoever had set it up. Over the next few weeks he noticed the handle turning up with increasing regularity. Somebody was having fun.

@greatcthulhu Hey @yogsototh Whassup dude? Tekeli-Li! LOL!

All over the world people joined in with the *@greatcthulhu* in conversation. Darren recognised a lot of the users from Mythos-based games and knew many of the writers from Lovecraftian anthologies and magazines. They all kept the joke going, re-tweeting *@greatcthulhu* to an ever wider audience.

The bulk of the traffic came through one particular hash-tag, *#starrywisdom*, and seemed to be concentrating on collecting information from world-wide sources on dreams, and in particular, dreams about the end of the world. Darren decided to play along.

@dazza Last night it was ice-giants and Ragnarok LOL Anyone else gone #viking? #starrywisdom

His expectations of any comeback were low; he only had a couple of dozen followers and his tweets were infrequent and rarely commented on. So he was pleasantly surprised the next morning to see that his *follower* count had risen to number fifty-two, and that *@greatcthulhu* was responsible.

@greatcthulhu Hey dude THX for the new dreamers at #viking. Y'all should be following @dazza

By mid afternoon Darren's follower count had risen to the low hundreds and he was hooked on the rush. He started posting using hash-tags that he knew had large numbers of followers.

@dazza Hey #kindle #ebooks Check out #starrywisdom for some cool reading material

He checked his follower count before going to bed. It was over a thousand and rising fast.

He thought he was too excited to sleep. He was wrong. He dreamed.

He is alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing exists save the dark and the boom of a pounding beat from below. Shapes move in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that caper and whirl as their dance grows ever more frenetic.

He tastes salt water in his mouth, and is buffeted, as if by a strong, surging tide, but as the beat grows ever stronger he cares little. He gives himself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.

He wanders, there in the space between. He forgets himself, forgets everything in a blackness where only the dance matters.

He woke to a crumpled, sweat-stained bed, upset that he had been taken out of the dream. But a *ping* from his laptop got his attention and seconds later the dream was forgotten as he read his Twitter follower number.

Five thousand? How high can it go?

The *#starrywisdom* tag was now showing as a trending topic, in the top ten of all subjects being discussed on Twitter. The *@greatcthulhu* handle seemed to be enjoying all the attention.

@greatcthulhu Any more of this and I might have to wake up early LOL! #starrywisdom

Darren spent the day tweeting to a large number of hash-tag topics, funneling more and more people towards the *#starrywisdom* topic. By the time he went to bed he had ten thousand followers on his own account, and *#starrywisdom* was the hottest topic in the Twitterverse.

He floats, mere shadow now, alongside tens of scores of others, in that cold silent sea. He has no thought for anything but the rhythm, the dance. Far

below him, cyclopean ruins shine dimly in a luminescent haze. Columns and rock faces tumble in a non-Euclidean geometry that confuses the eye and brooks no close inspection. And something deep in those ruins knows he is there.

He dreams, of vast empty spaces, of giant clouds of gas that engulf the stars, of blackness where there is nothing but endless dark, endless quiet. And while the slumbering god dreams, they dance for him, there in the twilight, dance to the rhythm.

He is at peace.

Coming up out of the dream felt like surfacing through hundreds of feet of water. He woke, panting and exhausted, physically drained. But mentally his mind buzzed with new ideas for promoting *#starrywisdom* and he wasted no time in putting them into action. He didn't even bother checking his own follower count. If he had, he'd have seen it was now over thirty thousand.

By late afternoon *#starrywisdom* was the hottest trending topic in Twitter history, with millions of people posting to the hash-tag, all of them including other tags in their posts, all of which further emboldened the *@greatcthulhu* poster.

@greatcthulhu 200K followers. Whoo-Hoo! #countdown brought forward. #starsareright

That next night Darren was at the keyboard for hours, posting a tweet every minute to as many new hash-tags as he could find. He also started to see new tags trending across the planet, all seemingly related to what he was doing. The #dance tag in particular got a lot of attention, with tens of thousands of people looking for information on a strange dream involving a great city deep under water and a dance in shadows.

At some level Darren knew he *should* be worried, and that *something* was spiraling out of control, something that had wormed its way into the Twitterverse and seemed intent on taking over. But as sleep took him he was thinking of yet more ways he could help *#starrywisdom* in the morning.

The dream is the same as before, but now there are many more shadows dancing with him, a host of shadows, numbering in the millions.

In the morning all the talk online was centered around *#dance*, and *@greatcthulhu* was being followed by over fifty per cent of all Twitter

users. And that next night, in their dreams, they danced.

They float, mere shadow now, tens of millions of them in that cold silent sea. And while the slumbering god dreams, they dance for him, there in the twilight, dance to the rhythm.

Everyone is at peace.

Darren lay on his bed, fully clothed, eyes open but sound asleep. Fifty thousand people followed him on Twitter, but he would never know. He was lost, lost to the dance.

@greatcthulhu Wakey-wakey ROFLMAO #countdown=0. #dance #starsareright

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